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# Shanghai *hukou*, English and politics of mobility in China's globalising economy

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**Abstract:** Amidst Shanghai's transformation into a global metropolis and the resulting influx of internal migration, obtaining Shanghai *hukou* remains a challenging yet highly coveted socioeconomic aspiration. Simply earning high incomes, even for middle-class migrants, falls short of ensuring the desired level of geographical and social mobility. This article draws from a sociolinguistic ethnography conducted within a Shanghai-based multinational corporation, where migrant employees are compelled to strategise around English proficiency as a form of cultural capital to position themselves as valued neoliberal worker-citizens, driven by ambitions of career advancement and privileged *hukou* attainment. It argues that in China's globalising economy, English not only enables multinational companies to stratify employees and select ideal internationalised human capital but also expedites migrant professionals' acquisition of Shanghai *hukou* – a symbol of upward mobility in China. By delving into tensions and inequalities at work, this study demonstrates how English, the language of global capitalism, aligns the migrants' interest in solidifying their middle-class status with Shanghai's agenda of becoming an Asian-Pacific economic hub.

**Keywords:** Shanghai *hukou*; English; middle-class migrants; worker-citizens; mobility

## 1 Introduction

My interest in researching migration and mobility through the lens of language and labour sprouted during my first meeting with Jackson. He was a participant in my sociolinguistic ethnography conducted in SOG, a multinational company in Shanghai, China's economic capital. Jackson, an internal migrant, relocated from Yunnan, a less affluent province in Southwest China, to Shanghai. With four years of experience at the company, he has taken on the position of assistant manager in the Sales &

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Marketing Division. Jackson now grapples with the immense pressure of securing a promotion to manager, not only for professional growth but also for Shanghai *hukou*, which grants specific residents exclusive access to social benefits and political rights. Shanghai *hukou*, an inherited form of intra-national citizenship, holds the key to providing Jackson's future children with a complete package of high-quality education and healthcare in Shanghai (Johnson 2017; Li et al. 2010), ensuring the family's socioeconomic progress. While his family has longed for the addition of children, Jackson's wife, Jing, disagrees (cf. Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1:     **Jing:** 我说真的! 在你给自己搞到上海户口前, 没有生小孩的计划!  
I am serious! No baby plan till you get yourself Shanghai  
*hukou!*

Jing, an economic migrant from Yunnan as well, was Jackson's collegemate and now works at an advertising agency. She envisions her husband as having the best chance within the family to obtain Shanghai *hukou* if he can overcome one final challenge – mastering English. In SOG, English proficiency is a precondition for job promotion due to its pivotal role in international business. Jackson has been diligently working day and night to enhance his English skills, even attending weekend classes. However, his colleagues also aspire to the same position and the accompanying quick path to *hukou*. This intense competition and peer pressure have subjected him to significant and sustained stress. Indeed, the core of this article revolves around the interplay of English proficiency and migrants' geographical and social mobility in globalising China.

Jackson's narrative epitomises the central struggles and concerns of the emerging middle class in Shanghai, particularly those who migrated to the city. According to the 2021 census report, 10.48 million individuals have flocked to Shanghai as migrant workers, accounting for nearly half of the resident population. This influx is projected to shape the future middle class in Shanghai, with Forbes China's report in 2018 anticipating that by 2025, 75 % of the new middle class will consist of migrants striving to attain Shanghai *hukou*. Shanghai stands out in China, characterised by its substantial migrant population and notably stringent *hukou* acquisition requirements. Unlike most Chinese cities open to anyone with a bachelor's degree, Shanghai's *hukou* application demands years of effort. First, to gain residence permits (*juzhuzheng* 居住证), applicants must secure stable employment in Shanghai and contribute to the city's social insurance scheme for six consecutive months. Next, they must accumulate 120 points to attain the status of "quasi-citizens," affording them temporary access to certain citizen benefits. Borrowing from Hammar (1990), the term "quasi-citizen" is used to underscore their intermediate status. While quasi-citizens enjoy more public welfare than those without residence permits, priority is consistently given to Shanghai citizens when allocating limited

resources in education, healthcare, and housing (Deets 2008). Subsequently, migrants must renew their residence status while engaging in social insurance for five to seven years – a duration even longer than what is required for citizenship in most Western countries. The Shanghai government prioritises human resources and capital over social objectives, regarding migrants as “necessary contributors to the economy but not as qualified beneficiaries of it” (Zhang 2012: 522). As for those who make substantial economic contributions, Shanghai readily provides a special expedited route. It allows high-level managerial and technological talents in multinational companies, which actively participate in elevating Shanghai to an Asian-Pacific economic hub, to directly apply for Shanghai *hukou* after making six months’ worth of social insurance payments. Hence, Jackson is pursuing a manager position in SOG, which would potentially ease his path to Shanghai *hukou*. Presently, he is even contemplating resigning from his job to learn English on a full-time basis. He deems his limited English skills as the primary impediment to becoming a valued worker-citizen in Shanghai – a crucial step for professional advancement and full citizenship.

This article seeks to integrate sociolinguistic ethnography into institutional (Smith 2005) and political economy analysis (Gal 1989, 2016) to investigate the significance of Shanghai *hukou* as both an internal migration system and a mechanism for reproducing exclusion and hierarchisation in globalising China. It focuses on middle-class migrants like Jackson, who, as quasi-citizens, are currently encouraged to invest in English learning to boost their competitiveness in global workplaces and accelerate the acquisition of Shanghai *hukou* – a neoliberal symbol of upward mobility in China. The term “middle class” reflects my particular interest in highly skilled professionals who are trained to meet the demands of the globalising new economy (Allan 2016), which in Shanghai entails possessing at least international communication knowledge, i.e., English skills. This study contributes to a sociolinguistic understanding of China’s internal mobility deeply rooted in the context of Shanghai *hukou* and the discourses surrounding global worker-citizens, shaped by the neoliberal value attributed to English (Park 2011). By documenting how the multinational company, SOG, and Shanghai managerially align English proficiency with the rewards of promotion and *hukou*, I argue that English, as a communication tool in the capitalist world-economy (Wallerstein 1979), serves to advance China’s globalising economy (Kwong 2019), structure Shanghai’s internationalised workforce, and facilitate individuals’ geographical and social mobility.

The paper is structured into seven sections. Section 2 reviews the literature on China’s *hukou* system to examine the precarity of migrant workers, while Section 3 explores the connection between pursuing Shanghai *hukou*, achieving middle-class status, and the role of English. Section 4 presents the research methodology and data used in the study. In Section 5, SOG’s language policies and daily work practices

are analysed to illustrate how English mediates individuals' professional development, which is vital for the prompt acquisition of Shanghai *hukou*. Section 6 further investigates SOG's managerial strategies and their impact on tensions and inequalities. In Section 7, the article concludes by discussing language issues in mobility regimes and analysing how Shanghai *hukou* remains a governmental tool for exclusion and stratification, with restricted prospects for change.

## 2 China's *hukou* system and precarious migrant workers

The *hukou* system, as a bureaucratic and institutional policy, is utilised by the Chinese government to regulate and distribute mobility. Similar to an internal visa, *hukou* grants access to public services and welfare in a specific city (Chan 2009). Introduced in the 1950s (Luo 1958), *hukou* is a vestige of China's centrally planned economy (Mallee 1996), classifying individuals as either rural or urban. During Mao's era (1949–1976), people were forbidden from changing their *hukou*, which was closely tied to the labour division. Rural *hukou* holders were allocated land for farming, while urban *hukou* holders were provided with city jobs (Cheung 2012). Following the “reform and opening-up” period in 1978, Deng Xiaoping's government (1977–1989) initiated *hukou* reforms to rejuvenate the labour market by encouraging the movement of workers from rural to urban areas and from less developed regions to developed ones. Since then, people have become accustomed to relocating among cities and towns in pursuit of employment opportunities (Ling 2017). Constant changes in China's society and *hukou* system are in line with the country's interpretation of neoliberalism and neoliberal markets (Zhang and Ong 2008), which seeks for the development of specific economic centres, as Deng's principle “let some regions get rich first” suggests (Naughton 1993). These *hukou* system reforms aim to enable unrestricted border crossing, promising upward social mobility through migration to these economic hubs (Cui and Cohen 2015).

However, the ideology underpinning the current *hukou* system persists largely unaltered in terms of being restrictive, exclusive, and exploitative (Chan and Buckingham 2008). This has given rise to a significant social concept – “migrant workers,” a term which refers to the floating population of internal migrants lacking the *hukou* of the city where they work (Zhu and Chen 2010). When moving from peripheral areas to urban centres, individuals desire not only protection from deportation and the right to seek employment but also long-term or permanent security through legal resident status and entitlement to social services,

welfare, and benefits (Castle and Davidson 2000; Chen et al. 2019). In Chinese public discourses, “mobility (*liudongxing* 流动性)” denotes individuals who can access local resources and gain social recognition for their citizen status (Zhao 2017). “Floating (*piaobo* 漂泊),” on the other hand, is typically associated with less privileged individuals who are compelled to move in search of opportunities, social integration, and even refuge (Mohabir et al. 2017). Internal migration in China often results in geographical “floating” marked by considerable uncertainty and anxiety, rather than geographical “mobility.” Migrants work hard to establish themselves in major cities like Shanghai, but achieving a sense of true belonging and integration remains challenging for them, regardless of their earnings (Huang et al. 2021).

The *hukou* struggle in China involves migrants from various socioeconomic backgrounds and reflects the forms of differential citizenship regimes within national borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Research in migration and labour extensively explores the infrastructures, practices, and processes that shape migration, highlighting how economic structures contribute to stratification within the migrant labour market (Deumert and Mabandla 2013; Vigouroux 2013). Emphasis is placed on the strategies employed to control migration and distinguish between the “desired” and “undesired” migrants. Indeed, migration policies are often intertwined with labour policies, with migrants consistently viewed as a potential labour force (Vigouroux 2017). While working-class, low-skilled migrants, such as construction, manufacturing, and domestic workers, often receive more attention in research on the rural-urban divide within the *hukou* system (Chan 2009), there is a notable gap in the study of middle-class, highly skilled migrants. I argue that conducting a comprehensive examination of middle-class migrants is essential for shedding light on the prominent discussion about symbolic inequalities within China’s olive-shaped social structure, where the middle class outnumbers other social classes (Li 2021). My participants are considered as emerging middle class, not just due to their income falling within the range of 10,000–40,000 RMB per year (Forbes China 2018), but also because they live and work in Shanghai as quasi-citizens, positioning themselves between the working class and the “upper class of ultra-rich” (Dong and Blommaert 2016: 35). Therefore, the notion of “middle-classness” here encompasses affective questions of citizenship and the ability to maintain and reproduce middle-class status, extending beyond purely economic considerations. In the next section, I further expand upon this concept of “middle-classness” by examining the pursuit of Shanghai *hukou* and its interrelation with the significance of English in Shanghai’s globalising new economy.

### 3 Pursuing Shanghai *hukou*, middle-classness and English

*Hukou*-related inequality is especially notable in Shanghai. The rapid economic growth along the Chinese east coast since the 2000s resulted in a substantial influx of migrant workers into the megacity (Tseng 2012). This migration wave has prompted Shanghai to establish increasingly strict criteria for *hukou* application in order to control the migrant inflow and select the most qualified citizens for the local labour market (Zhang and Tao 2012). Shanghai boasts one of the largest emerging middle-class populations, millions of whom even find themselves trapped in quasi-citizen status, struggling to devise strategies for attaining full citizenship (Zhang and Treiman 2013). During my investigation, all the assistant managers I interviewed rejected the label of “middle class,” primarily due to what they perceived as the unique challenges posed by Shanghai *hukou* in their quest for the decent life of the socially recognised middle class (Weiss 2019). For example, they expressed sentiments such as “salary means nothing,” “middle class is a joke without Shanghai *hukou*,” and “non-citizens are rootless duckweeds in Shanghai.” Such identity denial, grounded in concerns about emerging forms of social exclusion, resonates with the “Chinese middle-class insecurity and anxiety” (Li 2020: 304) stemming from the difficulty of obtaining Shanghai *hukou* and the associated rights. These rights encompass not only social welfare and benefits but also the essential foundation for accumulating capital to achieve and sustain family socioeconomic well-being, particularly in terms of access to educational resources in the era of the knowledge-based economy (Harris 2001). For instance, individuals from rural areas and small cities encounter greater difficulties in acquiring English, since they commenced their English education later and have fewer opportunities for practice compared to those born in Shanghai, a global city. As migrants, their deficiencies in cultural capital (English proficiency), social capital (social networks in Shanghai), and economic capital can translate into limited symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991), which affects their prospects for advancement in global workplaces and their ability to secure Shanghai citizenship. Their pursuit of Shanghai *hukou* is driven by a determination to prevent their children from experiencing a similar trajectory of disadvantage in the future (Henry 2021).

From the perspective of the Shanghai government, *hukou* is employed to regulate access to citizen life and manage the city’s labour force to meet its needs, effectively transforming migrants into productive worker-citizens (Allan 2016). While emerging middle-class migrants like Jackson can readily obtain residence permits and accumulate the necessary 120 points to enter the *hukou* waiting line, the transition from quasi-citizens to full citizens is a time-consuming and uncertain

process. Moreover, hierarchies emerge among the quasi-citizens. In the queue for Shanghai *hukou* under the latest points system, individuals who meet specific additional criteria can receive significant prioritisation and accelerate their path to *hukou*. The city has implemented favourable policies to draw in top-tier talents to support its economic transition from mass production of cheap consumer goods to technological innovation. In December 2020, Shanghai authorities unveiled a list of highly sought-after talent categories (Shanghai Municipal Government 2020), among which the category of “senior management talents in the regional headquarters and Research & Development centres of multinational companies in Shanghai” has attracted the most attention. It is deemed as an important extension of Shanghai’s Global Talent Program, designed to reshape the labour market structure by attracting highly skilled professionals to elevate Shanghai into a prominent Asian-Pacific economic centre. This highlights the pressing need for diverse migrant talents to join Shanghai’s workforce (You 2016). Employees capable of engaging with overseas markets and contributing to the city’s economy are given high priority, especially in light of Shanghai’s efforts to regain the confidence of multinational companies following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 lockdown in early 2022. In summary, there appears to be a backdoor opportunity for middle-class migrants employed in transnational corporations, as senior management posts represent both career advancement and Shanghai *hukou*.

Scholarship on migration and language emphasise that language policies and practices within institutions such as workplaces, play a crucial role in gatekeeping processes of legitimising and categorising migrants, as well as regulating access to resources (Duchêne et al. 2013). The above-mentioned preferential policy explicitly delineates Shanghai’s demand – highly skilled professionals well-versed in international business practices, and capable of promoting productivity and profitability in the global market. In this context, particular language skills are indispensable for ensuring productivity (Boutet 2008), and effective communication has become vital for generating new forms of surplus value (Spolsky 2012). Considering the status of English as the default *lingua franca* of global business and the world’s most widely spoken language (Jenkins et al. 2018), English competence is regarded as a fundamental quality in the making of an ideal labour force for China’s growing integration into the transnational sphere. Consequently, English proficiency becomes a prerequisite for professional development and performance rewards within multinational companies (Kingsley 2013), and for becoming privileged *hukou* applicants in Shanghai. This reflects a new work order centred on the cultivation of human capital through the pursuit of English, as the language of the new capitalism (Gee et al. 1996). Since Shanghai *hukou* is conceptualised as a hierarchical mechanism for selecting, shaping, and regulating qualified worker-citizens, intersecting with labour stratification within Shanghai’s neoliberal job market, the following sections

unpack my ethnography to elucidate how English conditions a form of privileged internal migration by mediating resource production and (re)distribution in global workplaces.

## 4 Methodology and data

To delve into the complexity of English, Shanghai *hukou*, and the precarity of middle-class migrants, this article draws on an ongoing sociolinguistic ethnographic study (Heller 2012) conducted at the Shanghai office of the multinational corporation SOG since 2021. Ethnography, far more than just a research method, is a lens through which researchers perceive the world, recognising reality as “complex and complicated, often a patchwork of overlapping activities” (Blommaert and Dong 2010:11). It places vital emphasis on meaning-making processes and strives for in-depth and “situated” analyses of how these processes operate, why they do so, and what they signify to individuals. This is achieved by employing “representative or telling cases to illustrate broader processes” (Heller et al. 2018: 2). The term “situated” implies that researchers attend to the specific conditions and contexts in which the processes under investigation unfold. Ethical considerations take precedence, with all participants receiving a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives and a form of information consent, offered in both Mandarin and English, before the commencement of the research. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of both the company and the participants.

The ethnographic data for this study were collected by gathering official materials (e.g., government policies and SOG’s staff manual), engaging in participant observation of everyday practices in SOG, conducting semi-structured interviews, and taking field notes. I consider this corporation emblematic of the relationship between such global workplaces and Shanghai *hukou*. Firstly, I documented SOG’s administrative organisational structure and labour management routines to investigate how linguistic production and consumption influence the (re)distribution of resources at work, including critical promotion opportunities like international business trips. Secondly, by actively participating in key activities within SOG, such as English language classes, I closely examined employees’ anxieties and aspirations regarding English as a form of speculative capital (Moyer and Martín Rojo 2007) for achieving social mobility and Shanghai citizenship. Thirdly, my interviews with various focal participants,<sup>1</sup> including assistant managers and HR personnel (cf. Table 1), shed light on the reasons behind the high turnover of

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<sup>1</sup> All participants preferred to be addressed by their English name as pseudonyms. This preference could be linked to their desire to project the image of English speakers.



**Table 1:** Focal participant list.

Names	Divisions	Positions
Jackson	Sales & Marketing Division	Assistant manager
John	Research & Development Division	Assistant manager
Edison	Purchasing Division	Assistant manager
Angela	HR Division	Consultant
Sandy	HR Division	Manager

English teachers and the conflicts in expectations between the company and migrant employees. To zoom in on the tensions underlying and the roots of inequality, this article analyses the neoliberal rationalities (Gershon 2011) behind SOG's English-mediated managerial strategies, which oversee the selection, regulation, and stratification of workers by controlling access to Shanghai *hukou* (Wang and Liu 2018) and the potential for social advancement it represents.

## 5 SOG as a steppingstone: an English-mediated global workplace

SOG, originally founded in the United States, is recognised as one of the most active foreign companies operating in China. Its first joint venture was set up in Beijing at the outset of China's "reform and opening-up" in the 1980s. Today, it has expanded its operations to over 30 Chinese cities. The specific branch of SOG documented in this article is located in Shanghai, which has also served as the Greater China headquarters since 2011. SOG has become one of China's major manufacturers of electronic and electrical appliances, including refrigerators, televisions, and air conditioners. It later ventured into the Chinese smartphone market by collaborating with European manufacturers of electronic components, such as memory chips and lithium-ion batteries. SOG is involved in numerous transnational projects across 50 countries and regions worldwide. In 2016, the SOG Global Research Centre was established in Shanghai as the largest innovative technology research and development team outside the United States. This move underscored the Shanghai office's ambition to become the Asian-Pacific headquarters, providing comprehensive support for global business operations. Thus, managers of SOG are in perfect alignment with the requirements for gaining accelerated access to Shanghai *hukou*. Most of its non-Shanghai-citizen employees work with the same goal: attaining a manager title and becoming a Shanghai citizen.

In this article, SOG is regarded as an institution of power that establishes rules, distributes resources, and maintains orders among employees. SOG's personnel administration system comprises three hierarchical layers: the decision-making layer, the management layer, and the operational layer. These layers constitute a rigid class system, where employees must ascend the hierarchies to achieve higher socioeconomic status and Shanghai *hukou*. Furthermore, jobs in SOG generally fall into two categories: senior and operational roles. For instance, within the Research & Development Division, engineers and tech-consultants are considered operational specialists, while managers hold senior positions that entitle them to various company benefits, including a quick pass to Shanghai *hukou*. Assistant managers, also part of the management level, occupy an intermediate position bridging operational and senior roles. When I interviewed assistant managers about their perceptions of their positions within the company, they drew parallels to the status of quasi-citizens in the immigration system. This analogy highlights the transitional nature of their posts, characterised as “hopeful but precarious,” as Jackson stated. They often receive assurances that with hard work, they could potentially become managers or even directors in the future. In terms of job duties, managers not only hold higher ranks but also oversee business operations worldwide, whereas assistant managers typically focus on the Mainland China's market. Over 70 % of these assistant managers are middle-class migrants with quasi-citizen status in Shanghai, all struggling for *hukou*. I am intrigued by their attempts to progress from assistant managers to managers and from quasi-citizens to citizens by mastering English and aligning with Shanghai's vision for competitive human resources in the evolving global economy, as well as the company's emphasis on accessing “bigger markets” – a term frequently mentioned by SOG's CEO and directors.

Like many multinational institutions, SOG adopts English as its corporate language and implements a series of language policies to facilitate effective communication among employees and clients from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds (Nekvapil and Sherman 2009). It requires employees in various posts to attain varying levels of English proficiency. Firstly, regardless of their divisions, all employees are expected to use English for office emails and phone calls with overseas clients and colleagues. All presentation slides and documents are prepared in both English and Mandarin for department meetings. Secondly, senior staff members are requested to demonstrate a particular standard of English competence, which can be achieved through international education or work experience, as well as specific qualifications such as BEC Higher (Cambridge Business English Certificate Higher) or TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). Assistant managers, therefore, ought to meet these language requirements for prestigious roles. Furthermore, SOG also provides language training, i.e., free English lessons during

lunchtime. While attendance is not compulsory, based on my observation, almost all the assistant managers voluntarily participated, even if it meant giving up their unpaid lunch break.

I witnessed first-hand the daily pressure employees experienced in this English-mediated global workplace. A notable example is one of my participants, John, serving as the assistant manager of the Research & Development Division, was tasked with developing new products by utilising available technologies in the Mainland market and attending international technological knowledge exchange meetings. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, he used to travel overseas for these purposes once every quarter. However, during and after the pandemic, he began attending bimonthly English webinars to stay updated on world-class technologies. English skills have become increasingly crucial for him to fully leverage SOG's investment in these costly seminars and enhance his job performance and productivity. This language of international communication, as a yardstick for regulating individuals, plays a role in who can decide what and how work should be done, who should be treated seriously, and who can attain promotion and Shanghai *hukou*, symbolising upward mobility in the organisation and society. Accordingly, both possessing English competence and achieving strong business performance are essential to demonstrating that an employee merits substantial business responsibilities and career opportunities offered by the company.

As per SOG's staff manual, promotion is intrinsically linked to job performance in two vital aspects: (1) successfully fulfilling professional responsibilities and (2) effectively representing SOG during international business trips. English not only mediates the daily operations of this multinational company but also holds increasing importance in work allocation and resource (re)distribution, especially in the context of transnational business trips. Another participant, Edison, the assistant manager of the Purchasing Division, revealed an unspoken rule within SOG: Employees selected to join core working teams for international business assignments would be automatically placed on the shortlist for future promotion. This practice reflects SOG's conversion of "international capability" into a prerequisite for intra-national mobility, including professional advancement along with acquiring Shanghai citizenship. Team members chosen for the trips are responsible for project presentations and business negotiations with potential foreign clients, conducted in English certainly. Upon their return, these employees are often presented with opportunities to lead independent projects that distinguish them from their colleagues. Edison elaborated on this, stating, "The more client resources I gain from the business trip, the greater my chances of promotion. I must enhance my English skills to expand my client connections." Hence, the distribution of opportunities to "fly over the ocean," whether through physical travel or virtual meetings on platforms like Zoom, stands as a pivotal juncture where SOG wields its power to

select a specific worker type for the international market. It is at these moments that individuals actively engage in the production and (re)distribution of resources, encompassing the cultivation of client networks and exploration of “bigger markets” beyond Mainland China.

## 6 Managerial strategies, tensions, and inequalities

China’s increasing integration into the global value chain and Shanghai’s ambition to become an Asian-Pacific economic hub have amplified the significance of equipping personnel with English proficiency (Piller and Cho 2013). Strategic human resource management constitutes an administrative focus for SOG’s global expansion and for shaping the possibilities of individual mobility. Employees are thus compelled to linguistically navigate tensions between the company’s expectations and their personal goals as they seek manager positions and Shanghai *hukou* through English. At times, their aspirations clash with how SOG organises work activities and hierarchises its staff. SOG has introduced two fundamental strategies to regulate its workforce and construct its labour management system, identifying individuals worthy of Shanghai *hukou* as a reward.

First of all, the company appears to favour assigning critical international business cases to employees with a background of living overseas or possessing high English proficiency. Angela, an HR consultant, emphasised during the interview that major global corporations in Shanghai prioritise “international talents” who are pursuing Shanghai *hukou*. According to her, these employees are more motivated to work diligently to secure a foothold in the global market and obtain Shanghai citizenship. In essence, SOG capitalises on employees’ eagerness to expedite their path to Shanghai *hukou*. “It’s a win-win situation. They need qualified employers to offer them *hukou*, while we need a qualified international workforce,” Angela explained. She also mentioned that HR would often place new employees with strong English skills in senior positions, even if they lack the same level of professional experience as their colleagues. My on-site observation confirmed this practice when I noticed that SOG has frequently provided more chances to newcomers with high English levels and international education backgrounds, assigning them responsibilities for new business projects to help them quickly gain experience and catch up with the old employees. Sometimes, HR would directly recruit graduates from top international universities as small team leaders. This approach has led to frustration and resentment among other employees who feel stuck in their positions while newcomers are “fast-tracked” to senior roles. In addition, employees born in

the *hukou* localities with limited access to quality English education have faced competitive disadvantages from the outset. However, HR manager Sandy firmly denied at the interview that this is an exclusive or unfair system, emphasising, “The limits of their language mean the limits of their world.” She considers English proficiency as the most important professional skill in today’s world and regards employees proficient in English as valuable human capital to be nurtured. In general, SOG aims to attract and retain individuals described as “promising, internationalised, and skilled talents” by offering them greater opportunities for promotion and quick access to Shanghai *hukou*. Nonetheless, employees like Jackson, who hail from peripheral regions, encounter disadvantages within this system due to their lack of linguistic capital in the global market (Park and Wee 2012). They are encouraged to acquire English and improve their job-related skills but are not necessarily expected to be part of the highly valued international workforce.

Secondly, SOG offers the aforementioned daily 1.5-hour free English training sessions at noon to ensure employees can effectively use English at work. The teachers are experienced professionals specialising in business English, yet I have observed a high turnover in this role due to conflicting expectations between learners and teachers. Employees have told me that they consider these classes too “basic” to fulfil their aim of improving their English level to be selected for international business trips. Nevertheless, SOG hires English teachers with the intention of equipping learners with elementary English skills for everyday tasks such as email communication and phone-call making. This clash between English as a proxy for senior management positions and English as a tool for basic business communication has led to conflicts. Migrant employees aspire to secure promotion to obtain Shanghai *hukou*, necessitating rapid and efficient English acquisition. They express their frustration when progress is slow during the midday language training. My fieldwork revealed that this expectation gap remains unaddressed. Workers are encouraged to sacrifice lunch breaks for the English class, often with their specific needs being overlooked. Their disappointment and anger peak whenever essential business responsibilities, such as international business trips directly associated with promotion and, ultimately, acquiring Shanghai *hukou*, are perceived as being unfairly distributed. Essentially, SOG’s employees view the English training as an opportunity to bridge this gap and as a means for the company to redistribute resources and power. Their desire for senior positions and a swift path to Shanghai *hukou* hinges on the neoliberal promise that English is a key to geographical and social mobility in China.

The on-site observations and interviews suggested an implicit categorisation of employees desiring promotion and Shanghai *hukou*. While SOG has never explicitly delineated this categorisation, its repercussions are evident in the allocation of business opportunities and the content of English training. The first group consists

of high-ranking university graduates with strong English proficiency who come from affluent backgrounds. The second group comprises employees with extensive work experience but limited English skills due to the scarcity of English educational resources in their regions during their student years. It is noteworthy that English became a compulsory subject in the Chinese national curriculum in 2001 (Sun et al. 2016), and prior to that, the provision of English education depended on the economic conditions of specific areas, with only those holding *hukou* in developed cities having access to English education. This geographical inequality in the distribution of educational and economic resources is particularly pronounced in China, where western inland regions, economically disadvantaged compared to the eastern coastal areas, receive lower-quality English education (Hu 2005). This regional economic disparity forces migrants like Jackson to pursue residence and employment in Shanghai. It also explains his limited proficiency in English, a language that has not been considered an asset deserving of investment in his hometown market.

“It is not fair at all,” expressed many participants during the interviews, highlighting their dissatisfaction with SOG’s practice of assigning employees with limited English skills to less advantageous positions and denying their qualifications. This practice further exacerbates the existing structural inequalities in wealth and educational distribution in China (Zhao and Li 2019). It is worth mentioning that, according to the Shanghai *hukou* policy, quasi-citizens with overseas educational backgrounds can easily obtain *hukou* after just several months of paying social insurance. SOG seems to prefer and value the same group of people as the Shanghai *hukou* system does – productive worker-citizens with a strong footing in the globalising new market.

## 7 Discussion and conclusion

Questions surrounding language in mobility regimes within the Shanghai context differ significantly from those in predominantly Western contexts. The language favoured for acquiring Shanghai *hukou* is not the national official language, Mandarin, but rather English, a language symbolising elevated levels of professionalism in the contemporary global market. This association of English with professionalism, career advancement, and rewarded mobility is deeply rooted in the broader notions of English as the language of global capitalism (O’Regan 2021). Proficiency in English not only facilitates professional development in international business but also opens doors to higher salaries and even offers an expedited path to Shanghai *hukou*. The labour flow pattern discussed in this study pertains to internal migration and politics of internal mobility, rather than transnational migration and mobility. Recognising that the Chinese *hukou* system continues to function as a *de facto*

citizenship regime, mirroring the unequal distribution of resources akin to international border processes (Johnson 2017), it becomes evident that geographical mobility within China is closely intertwined with social mobility (Wu and Wallace 2021). These two forms of mobility are integral to the social hierarchies that underlie contemporary inequalities in China. Thus, Shanghai *hukou* serves as a governmental technology for institutional inclusion, exclusion, and stratification (Wang and Liu 2018), perpetuating conditions of precarisation and exploitation, primarily due to the uneven reconfiguration of space-resource relationships. These dynamics intersect with mobility as a specific form of social empowerment and individuals' desires to accumulate cultural and economic capital.

This article not only delves into the study of “citizenship in non-western contexts” (Chung 2017: 443) but also underscores the necessity of problematising the prevailing notions of geographical mobility as a symbol of socioeconomic “upward movement” and positive change. It endeavours to comprehend migration within the broader framework of political and social inequalities. While Chinese individuals seem to increasingly be set “free” to move, the enduring disparities in mobility and social hierarchies, grounded in the *hukou* system, remain deeply entrenched and are now intricately linked to the dynamics of world capitalism. By examining SOG and Shanghai as focal points for observing how neoliberalism unfolds in China (Ong 2007), I argue that it is not Western capitalism influencing or shaping the Chinese paradigm of distributing Shanghai *hukou* for upward mobility. Instead, China is crafting its unique version of neoliberalism, one “with Chinese characteristics” (Harvey 2005: 137), to govern internal migration within its political-economic framework. Through an in-depth analysis of the Shanghai *hukou* system and the production, circulation, and consumption of English in the global workplace, this article demonstrates how English, treated as speculative capital, aligns the neoliberal interests of employees, SOG, and Shanghai in complex and dynamic ways. A highly skilled professional with a certain level of English proficiency embodies the ideal working subject toward which migrant employees are requested to direct their efforts (Gong 2023). This is the preferred citizen type for Shanghai and the preferred worker type that multinational companies prioritise in their recruitment, work assignments, and promotion. Their utilisation of English as linguistic capital for promotion and citizenship – namely, for social and geographical mobility – plays into a specific neoliberal framing of language for self-improvement and economic freedom, with “speakers motivated in their acquisition by choice, opportunity, and social fulfilment” (Henry 2021: 4).

When English proficiency is connected to the definition and understanding of a good worker-citizen, as well as how SOG and Shanghai manage resources, capital, and power, emerging middle-class migrants find themselves grappling with conflicting expectations. English is here produced to conform to the market's

demands, maximising the interests of the multinational company and the global city, rather than catering to individuals' aspirations for mobility and sustainability. English also plays a crucial role in upholding the promise that Shanghai *hukou* is attainable – if not immediately, then perhaps in the future – as long as individuals diligently fulfil their responsibilities within the corporate framework and contribute to the city's development. This promise of English motivates migrant employees to perform their neoliberal subjectivity (Park 2021), actively adapting to the English-mediated global market and Shanghai *hukou* application requirements. However, they may not realise that they have already been profiled, categorised, and selected as either winners or losers (Niman 2010), based primarily on their original linguistic capabilities, or more precisely, their initial socioeconomic backgrounds (Markovits 2019). By assessing migrants' labour productivity and qualification for citizenship, the Shanghai *hukou* system creates a process of reproduction that legitimises socioeconomic stratification along established class hierarchies driven by regional disparities in China, such as the rural-urban and inland-coastal divide (Liao and Wei 2016). This process occurs through English and the quality education it represents, which is already unevenly distributed. The low success rates in gaining access to Shanghai *hukou* should chiefly be attributed to the fact that *hukou* is not intended for universal distribution. It is a differential system of othering, bordering, and excluding individuals, aimed at stabilising hierarchies and privileges as rewards. Consequently, it offers limited room for disruption or change.

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