

The pursuit of new citizenship by peri-urban residents in China: Status, rights, and individual choice

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Abstract

Although China did not announce any official urbanization policy until 2014, since the 1980s urbanization has been the core goal of China's unceasing push for modernization and national rejuvenation. Tens of millions of inhabitants living on the fringes of China's cities merely hold temporary permits with virtually no political and social rights and only a modicum of public policy benefit in the cities where they work. The rights and social entitlements of these people are changing once again, because cities in China are now required by the central government to include the majority of them as normal citizens with equal rights. From the perspectives of three groups of peri-urban residents – relocated agricultural elites, in situ urbanites, and migrant workers – in Luoyang, Shanghai, and Hohhot, this article traces the dynamic dimensions of this ongoing, highly complex urbanization process. We argue that the decision to become a participant, negotiator, deal-maker, or deal-breaker in the migration, displacement, and/or resettlement process involves proactive agency and rational choices in a fast-moving environment, and that cities in China must make concessions to convince peri-urbanites to give up their official rural links.

Keywords

peri-urban residents, urbanization, new citizenship, individual choice, Luoyang, Hohhot, Shanghai

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Although China did not announce any official urbanization policy until 2014, since the 1980s urbanization has been the core goal of China's unceasing push for modernization and national rejuvenation.¹ Chinese people in their hundreds of millions have traded their village lives for a new peri-urban or urban existence. For each former rural dweller now living in the cities, the transition from rural to peri-urban or urban is a complex human drama driven by national and local development goals as well as personal interests. The policy change in 2014, known as new-type urbanization (新型城镇化),² was China's first explicit urbanization programme officially initiated in 2012 and issued as a planning decision two years later. There never existed any formalized 'old-type' urbanization policy, even though the urban population by the official census count rose from 17 per cent of the total population in 1979 to 56 per cent in 2015, and it is now 60 per cent.

This raises the question of how rural people make the transition from rural to peri-urban and urban. In an essay on Chinese urbanization, John Friedmann proposes that rural-urban relations should be studied from an 'urban rather than rural perspective': 'rural folk now live in the shadow of a middle-sized or large city; they are governed from the city; their livelihood is increasingly geared to urban life'.³ This formulation reinforces the impression that those on the peri-urban fringe are passive, non-participatory pawns or simply losers in the dynamic yet incomplete process of urbanization. A typical narrative about the role of landless villagers goes like this: 'rural-urban integration in China's development discourse has not enabled landless villagers to participate in new systems'.⁴ In this article, we argue that victimhood is only part of the story. Reversing the 'view from the city',⁵ we focus on a number of ordinary individuals from the countryside whom we have encountered in our respective fieldwork since 1979. Our subjects, recently resettled in the peri-urban zones of Luoyang (Henan), Shanghai, and Hohhot (Inner Mongolia), all deal with the issues of status and rights due to the ongoing urbanization policy that reflects the confluence of individual circumstances, local conditions, and national trends.⁶

This individual-oriented approach, drawing on diverse urban settings, upset our own presumptions that rural people who had relocated to peri-urban areas were little more than vulnerable victims of rapacious real estate developers and local officials. The focus on the individual is important, for we discovered that people who have already resettled or are still in the process of resettling are, by and large, active agents who pursue their own interests, grasp any opportunities that come their way, and demand their rights and entitlements. Altogether this adds a much more dynamic dimension to the urbanization process in contemporary China.⁷ The decision to become a participant, negotiator, deal-maker or deal-breaker in the migration, displacement and/or resettlement process involves a set of rational choices, even though the means involved may sometimes appear coerced.⁸ Giving special attention to peri-urban areas allows us to better trace how the mechanisms of urbanization work in rural areas that are already integrated into emerging megacities.⁹ The processes examined here militate against firmly circumscribed categories of citizenship. The idealized equal rights of all citizens are compromised by multiple old classifications, including hukou (household registration). Accordingly, turning rural people into urbanites (市民化) with full rights as a step to exterminate extant inequality, at least among a large part of the population, is a process characterized by intersecting regulations and countervailing effects of entitlements, which can only be resolved in trade-offs at the individual level.

Using empirical source material drawn from published books, articles, policy documents, and over 100 field visits, we first discuss the theoretical concept of the urbanizing individual before examining the ways in which status inequality among individuals, in particular hukou¹⁰ and educational achievement, in both conventional and new-type urbanization developments, are being employed by Chinese state and local authorities. The experiences of three types of rural individuals in peri-urban areas – relocated rural elites (established urbanites), in situ urbanites, and migrant workers – in Luoyang, Shanghai, and Hohhot capture some important features of the diverse and non-linear realities of peri-urbanization across China.

The individual in theory: Inequality as a mechanism

In this section, we first discuss two kinds of conceptual framework for the individual, one anchored in ethnographic sociology and the other in institutional economics. Second, we analyse a hidden mechanism, the intentional use of inequality by the Chinese authorities. Third, we argue that this mechanism underpins the resilient role of the individual in China's ever-expanding urbanization process, which had been progressing in fact if not in name for decades before the central government finally acknowledged it in 2014, calling it new-type urbanization.

Individuals in China came to attract attention in the academic field in 1978–83, the period of early reforms, when they were made responsible for their own gains and losses in the household responsibility system for agricultural production.¹¹ We explore individualization mainly in terms of this political economy switch underlying the Chinese reform, which incentivized people to develop their own livelihood, pursuing opportunities within informal settings and relying on family and personal networks for support. Individualization took away social safety nets and enforced individual reliance on oneself, so that employment became precarious and uncertain; the real comparison, however, is the hardships during the previous era of egalitarianism, a situation which seems to be forgotten in much of scholarly research. Consequently, researchers rarely take notice of the deliberate use of inegalitarian practices by the state as a development tool. Although collective action of rural people has been amply recorded in recent decades, collective action itself has left few, if any, traces in terms of persistent collective, let alone oppositional, institutions: peri-urban rural people in China have occasionally pursued their individual interests in opportunistic, fleeting association with others.¹²

As real-life stories in the following pages illustrate, individualization and social change in urbanizing China, even – perhaps especially – among those who were migrant workers at some point of their lives, have been accompanied by choice, self-assertion, and new opportunities. The ability of individuals to radically improve their situation during the 1980s and 1990s became clear as poverty declined and most human development indicators rose¹³ – although relative deprivation caused by the widening wealth gap became a sore point for many. The uprooting and relocation of agricultural workers and their families in the fast-growing Chinese cities would be better described as a transition from poor to somewhat better circumstances, rather than as a generalized, drastic state of anomie or displacement.

According to institutional economists, institutional change is driven by profit maximization and improvement in economic efficiency, as much as by technological and organizational innovation. Our perception is clouded by the omnipresent economic truism that by seeking equilibrium the market gravitates towards greater efficiency in an autopoeitic process based on the survival of the fittest.¹⁴ It is more apposite to observe that since the 1980s, the Chinese economic system has explicitly instrumentalized the equilibrium-seeking forces of the market as a growth-inducing mechanism to strategically induce and manage disequilibrium, enabling the state to exploit social and economic inequalities to achieve planned development goals. Since 1978 individualization has in essence been the result of a controlled release of the massive pent-up potential of under-employed villagers longing for a better life. Their new-found autonomy allowed them to develop new economic activities in a setting where market-based exchange mechanisms were gaining ground and collective institutions such as people's communes were beginning to crumble. As a result of these policy developments, living standards in China – rural, peri-urban, and urban – have been continuously improving.

The state's deliberate utilization of social inequality is based on officially imposed differential status regimes, most importantly the hukou system, within which individualization functions to generate the unequal conditions necessary for achieving growth. China's institutionalized system of social inequality originated in the state's intention to bring about large-scale urban industrialization through socialist transition in the late 1940s. In the 1950s, industrial production was regarded as more efficient, technologically advanced, and scientific than agricultural output, and in the view of Chairman Mao Zedong, must be segregated, practically and ideologically, from rural production.

This strategic separation enabled industry, urban life, and industrial workers and engineers to emerge as superior to their rural counterparts. It was wrongly believed that the planned flow of resources between agriculture and industry would systematically reduce the gap between the two sectors. The two different types of public landownership from Mao's era (1949–76), and still applicable to urban development in 2019, reflect a parallel segregation: collective ownership by local villagers (i.e. by 'the labouring masses', after the abolishment of the people's communes in 1983 controlled by the village administration on their behalf) versus ownership by the state (the people). Thus, the 'backward' agricultural sector became collectively owned, while 'modern' industry belonged to the state.

In the post-Mao period, Chinese reforms have been underpinned by the belief that individuals are the agent of their own fate – although there is no pretence that they are equal in terms of rights, skills, and abilities, or even opportunities. In 1983, China's rural collective enterprises were transformed into township and village enterprises (TVEs) and began paying cash salaries to workers (rather than awarding work points). Individuals could officially register micro-enterprises with up to eight employees, although in reality there was no upper limit to the number of people they could hire. However, even when abandoning agriculture became a practical option, families initially tended to remain on their land, as their land-use contract, house, and team membership all hinged on their agricultural hukou. Many farmers with local hukou status working in TVEs sublet their land to farmers migrating in from other regions.

Despite this growing flexibility, the discriminatory hukou system remained firmly in place: agricultural workers and their families only enjoyed citizenship and social rights

in their village, and it was difficult to change registration status. Working in tandem with the market mechanism, this asymmetry in individual rights became the ubiquitous driver of growth. As our urban stories indicate, status inequality means that individuals are constantly assessing the monetary and non-monetary value of trade-offs and considering countervailing rationales and opportunities, refracted through the lens of family obligations and personal beliefs.

This process goes hand in hand with official policy changes in urbanization. In the 1980s, urbanization revolved around rules on establishing small towns (镇) and on farmers switching to urban hukou in their area.¹⁵ While the number of officially designated townships (乡) dropped from 31,642 in 1994 to 12,282 in 2014, the number of towns, often merging several townships, increased from 16,433 (1994) to 20,401 (2014) over 20 years, and the new urban street committees introduced in 2000, often based on transformed townships, stood at 7696 in 2014. The seemingly trivial change in official terminology made in that year from the descriptive term urbanization (城市化) to the policy task of new-type urbanization¹⁶ was hugely important in two respects: (a) it explicitly included the formerly 'rural' towns in the urban bracket and as objects of urban development; and (b) the 2014–20 plan aims to increase the urbanization rate by around eight percentage points to 60 per cent of the total population in the same period, relocating more than 20 million citizens each year of the six-year period. Meanwhile, urban hukou is set to grow by 10 percentage points from 35.3 to 45 per cent during the same period, transferring on average 25 million people per year. Urban school provision for migrant workers' children must exceed 99 per cent, and free skills training for the urban unemployed, migrant workers, and new labour market entrants was set at 95 per cent. The provision of social services for the urban population is slated to rise in three key areas: pensions (from 67 to over 90 per cent); health care (from 95 to 98 per cent); and guaranteed affordable housing (from 12.5 to more than 23 per cent).¹⁷

What impact will these changes have on the individual peri-urbanite? Rural migrants to Chinese large cities often leave their village home unoccupied and their land is passed on to neighbours for little or no rent. Mostly 'permanent residents' living in urban areas without an urban hukou, these individuals and families often believe that they are entitled to the repossession value of their former house and land, and that the rural community will provide health insurance and a social allowance if all else fails. Even those entitled to urban hukou often hold out until they are sure that an urban hukou will be more advantageous than their existing agricultural status.¹⁸ Meanwhile, land consolidation and pressure on absentee villagers to cut their ties with the land are gaining momentum, as the 2014–20 New-Type Urbanization Plan demonstrates. This policy was followed by a new national strategy to rejuvenate the Chinese countryside, announced in February 2018, indicating the party-state's desire to develop stronger agricultural production investment, professionalization, and earning capacity in rural areas.¹⁹

For individuals, the choice to become urban involves multiple calculations about education, skills, career, housing, family and kinship ties, and their personal economic interests alongside perceptions of social status and location. These considerations can be mapped onto three significant groups of agricultural migrants living in China's peri-urban zone.

Group one: Relocated agricultural elites

In previous research on ways in which rural migrants gain urban residency, the many who make the transition as a result of their success in the Chinese college entrance examination (高考) have been given little attention. Following its reinstatement in 1977, the national examination became a crucial channel for upward social mobility. In 1977–9 and the early 1980s, students with agricultural hukou comprised 80–90 per cent of the total enrolment at Chinese universities and colleges, whereas today that figure is still over 60 per cent at provincial-level universities and colleges, despite the proliferation of lower-level local universities, colleges, vocational schools, and the increased proportion of people with urban hukou.²⁰

As of 2015, around 57 per cent of rural high-school graduates were still not attending college. Thus, those who make it through college and graduate schools are virtually guaranteed urban hukou status by means of their degrees, with the prospect of good careers to follow: these agricultural elites are meritocratic rural urbanizers.²¹ The experience of two individuals from Luoyang, Henan Province, strongly suggests that meritocratic urbanizers play an equally important role in cities as the in situ urbanites and migrant workers.

Among those relocated agricultural elites are a significant number of the new rich and cadres who have claimed a place among the powerful new urban elites throughout China. In her early fifties, Mrs Hua²² has a PhD in economics and is a faculty member at a university in Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan. She comes originally from a rural county, a jurisdiction that has since developed into a county-level city within the prefecture-level city of Luoyang. In the early 1980s, her father, a temporary assistant at a small school factory in Luoyang, first brought her, the eldest of three siblings, to the city of Luoyang to receive a high school education. Living in a small shed at the school factory, with primitive cooking equipment, and lacking indoor running water, an indoor bathroom, or a kitchen, the young Mrs Hua studied hard and was accepted by a university in Kaifeng, also in Henan. After receiving a BA degree in English in 1987, she earned her MA and PhD degrees in the 1990s in Wuhan, Hubei Province. Having worked in an export company, she secured university teaching positions as a faculty member with an urban hukou. Also hailing from the countryside, her husband received a doctorate from the same school as she, and has practised as a medical surgeon while managing a hospital, an investment company, and several other businesses where Mrs Hua's brother works as an accountant. Before the liberalizing of the one-child policy in 2014, the couple, like many rural people, managed to have two children without encountering real barriers.

Planning to buy a new villa, for over a decade they have been living in a five-bedroom villa-apartment with separate quarters for a live-in maid, near Zhengzhou's East High Speed Railway Station. They also have a professional chauffeur and a shared parking garage with its own elevator. Based on investments in the United States, Mrs Hua and her son applied for permanent US residence, and in 2015 they were granted provisional American green cards, although Mrs Hua neither lives nor works in the United States. As of 2018 her 24-year-old son has been living in Arlington, Virginia. Mrs Hua has to visit the United States every six months to keep her permanent residence status.

Asked why she had sought the green card, Mrs Hua said that it would enable their younger daughter to attend high school in the United States, leading to a better life for her child. On top of their other commitments, she, her husband, and her brother are involved in real estate development in her hometown, which is itself set for further urbanization.

Individual initiatives such as those taken by Mrs Hua engender new hopes for future opportunities, although they may be limited by the power, rights, and abilities of the person involved. Nevertheless, new opportunities that present themselves may operate within very wide limits. Our imagining of the future and of the existing order stands in mutual tension, for the 'existing order gives birth to utopias which in turn break the bonds of the existing order, leaving it free to develop in the direction of the next order of existence'.²³ This mechanism, it seems, functions at all levels, and for the individual it may mean that when a hoped-for situation eventuates, it in turn opens up new possibilities to pursue.

A journalist and multimedia specialist, Mr Shi, also from Luoyang, exemplifies this same principle. Now in his late forties, he earned a university degree in computer science in the early 1990s, and has since worked at a government news agency in Luoyang.²⁴ He was born in Gongyi, now a county-level city in the city region of Zhengzhou. Although his modest family house now seems primitive by today's standards – it lacked heating, hot water, and other basic facilities – he is still very attached to his home village perched on the very top of Mt. Fuxi, today a place much visited by tourists.

In 2014, during the first author's field visit to his hometown, Mr Shi recalled that he had to walk over 20 *li* (about 10 km) to attend the local primary school each day. His young daughter²⁵ is enrolled in an exclusive international school in the city of Luoyang and will be sent overseas to study if the couple's plans come to fruition. In the push for development in their home village that has been underway since 2012, their mountain house was demolished, triggering a long spell of depression for both Mr Shi and his mother:

- Author: What about compensation for your old family home (as of April 2018)?
 Shi: The compensation settlement will either be in cash for a structure of more than 100 square metres, amounting to a few hundred thousand renminbi, or a replacement apartment for my parents.
- Author: Did your parents accept the cash settlement?
 Shi: No, the cash offered was too meagre and frankly useless. My parents are living with me while they are waiting for the replacement apartment. The real estate developers are bad, and the government routinely puts pressure on agricultural households whose children hold official positions by threatening to fire their children or cut off their children's salaries if they make a fuss.²⁶ My parents did not want me and my brother, who also works for the government, to lose our jobs. The government's tactics are very effective.
- Author: Really? How big is your own apartment in Luoyang?
 Shi: The gated apartment I currently live in is 200 square metres on the 16th floor in the Old City District of Luoyang, a building with a beautiful garden. [He showed the author some photos of the residents' community gardens.] I have actually bought

three apartments – with a total area of 500 square metres – in Luoyang [one in the Old City District, one in the New City District developed in the early 2000s, and one in the Xigong District]. The other two apartments are empty, and I need to have the interior decoration done soon.

Author: Then you are hardly the victim here; you are a beneficiary of the system. You are a winner. With house prices in Luoyang sky-rocketing, you are well placed to buy up houses in your home village, where your family's house used to be.

Shi: [Nods in tacit agreement.]

Like the rest of their privileged cohort who initially relocated to the cities for higher education and a better life, Mrs Hua and Mr Shi are highly motivated individuals, juggling education, career, registration status, entitlements, income, and their family heritage while keeping one eye on new possibilities for the future. Far from being an impediment, urbanization for this group is proving to be a major stimulus, a source of wealth and social rights.

Group two: In situ urbanites

How is the agricultural migrant faring, and in some cases thriving, in Chinese cities? Tenacity, innovation, and flexibility are all qualities needed to negotiate the complex urban environment and deal with the authorities – situations that often have their fair share of drama.

For some, the transition does not always proceed smoothly. This was the case for the Zhou couple, in situ urbanites living in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, whom the second author visited in May 2016 and again in April 2017.

A frontier city of 17,224 square kilometres, with over three million permanent inhabitants (more than two million of whom are urbanites) in 2017,²⁷ Hohhot is undergoing a massive new wave of urbanization, the fourth in 100 years. In the early 20th century, the ancient cities of Guihua and Suiyuan were incorporated into the much larger centre of Guisui County. A second wave of urban expansion in the 1950s was curtailed during the period 1965–83 when Inner Mongolia was divided into three parts during the Cultural Revolution. But a third wave gathered momentum when the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region was re-established in the 1980s.

By the end of the millennium, Hohhot's peri-urban areas, mainly populated by Mongolian and Han farmers, were generally poorly developed and lacked initiatives for rural industrialization. Its towns and townships offered few opportunities for off-farm incomes. Hohhot's urban districts, by contrast, became a magnet for migrants from throughout Inner Mongolia, in particular its rural hinterland; the poor rural economy made the move to the city attractive. An established urban infrastructure, the creation of development zones, and the residential expansion of Hohhot created new job opportunities, as part of the informal and formal economy. On the other hand, rural people tended to hold on to their land and hukou, which provide them with a basic form of insurance and the possibility of compensation for the loss of their homes at a time when peri-urban villages are undergoing rapid development. As in most other Chinese cities, the 2014–20 New-Type Urbanization Plan is currently transforming Hohhot, and a fifth wave, the

Hohhot–Baotou–Ordos–Yulin urban cluster, looks set to develop the region into a sprawling, coordinated megacity.

Mr Zhou and his wife are suburban villagers in Hohhot's Saihan District. When we spoke, their house had been recently demolished as part of the urbanization project. Although unhappy with the official procedures and the compensation offered, Mr Zhou's biggest complaint was about the behaviour of his younger brother. Now that their former home had been repossessed and knocked down, according to existing practice Zhou and his aged father should have shared the settlement funds. However, his younger brother claimed the compensation on behalf of the whole family, so securing what he believed to be his own share. When the brother was born, he was supernumerary under the family planning policy in place at the time and was registered as the son of another couple, so that the family incurred no penalty. When he came of age, he left Hohhot to study in another city, obtained an urban hukou and now earned a substantial income. As Mr Zhou's three sisters were all married, the burden of caring for their parents in old age fell on his shoulders.

The compensation given for the former family home did not fail to attract the younger brother's interest. A fixed asset that could not be traded, the house had suddenly been converted into cash. Mr Zhou's options were either to take the full amount offered or to sign up for a subsidized apartment, committing part of the compensation up front to cover the equity required for the new home. However, he declined to make an immediate decision when the surveyors called. His mother then gave the younger brother the right of attorney to sign the contract with the developers. The brother did so and the new apartment was now registered in his name; he also made sure that the balance was placed in his own account. Mr Zhou was understandably distressed. Although his brother may have acted in the family's interest and intended to share the compensation money, he had certainly secured his own share (to which he would normally not be entitled), and he, not Mr Zhou, could now use the apartment as collateral or to manipulate other members of the family.

This situation was by no means unique. In the village, the private agreements and informal institutions created by previous generations were collapsing, and families were being torn apart. Mr Zhou, a devout Christian, was determined to turn the other cheek. By April of the following year, the Zhous were given some concessions: they were to receive one-third, rather than the expected half, of the value of the repossessed house, and their younger son, rather than they themselves, was designated to take possession of the new apartment when it was ready.

The Zhou story exemplifies the swiftly moving forces created by urbanization. While Mr Zhou and his wife prevaricated at a critical juncture, his younger brother and mother acted swiftly and created a new situation for the family. The Zhous saw and heard what was coming, but failed to act. The need to change from a peasant mentality to an awareness of the urban facts of life was palpable during our interviews with the couple. They now both know that they must act decisively to secure their future.

The same mechanisms are at work in Luoyang, too, where experiments designed to phase out the hukou system are being carried out by the authorities.²⁸ In the newly developed Luolong District, residents are formulating a range of strategies – including

opening ‘bed & breakfast’ hotels and constructing new floors or nooks on houses flagged for demolition in order to optimize the footage claimed for compensation – to deal with land expropriation.

The capital of 13 Chinese dynasties, Luoyang gradually lost its geopolitical and cultural status from the 13th century onwards, becoming something of a backwater by the 20th century when Zhengzhou, the main railway hub, emerged as Henan’s capital. However, Luoyang accrued some benefits during the 1950s–60s when a number of key industries and military units were relocated to the city. The first 30 years of the People’s Republic of China witnessed a substantial expansion of Luoyang’s urban area with large *danwei* (单位, work unit) compounds. On the other hand, agricultural activities in the peri-urban zone underwent only limited industrialization. During the reform era, migrants flowed into Luoyang from its rural hinterland. In the early 2000s, the development of vast peri-urban areas such as the new district south of the Luo River involved the rehousing of large numbers of villagers near their former home, including the eight peri-urban villages²⁹ around the Longmen Grottoes, which became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001 in the newly created Luolong District.

The residents of these eight peri-urban villages have experienced urbanization in two major waves, in 1999–2000 and from 2012 onwards, primarily driven by the changed status of the Longmen Grottoes, an ancient Buddhist site, in concert with China’s urban spread and New-Type Urbanization Plan.

The first wave of demolition and relocation hit the city in summer 1999. To fulfil UNESCO’s requirements and to ensure the success of Longmen’s nomination as a World Cultural Heritage site, the city of Luoyang embarked on a massive environmental clean-up in a campaign that included both persuasion and coercion, part of which involved the resettlement of over 700 households in Longmen Village near the northern entrance to the Longmen Grottoes.³⁰ Although some villagers found it difficult moving to a new residential area two or three blocks away from their old home, most of them did comply. During the first author’s field visit in 2011, we were told by Mrs Li, a villager and local convenience store owner, that the villagers had all made a fortune from the relocation. Apart from being compensated for their houses, each farmer had also received RMB 300–400 for every small tree on their property, and over RMB 3000 for a small, shallow family well, drawing on the high water table at Longmen. ‘Now they live in spacious three-storey houses, and they are happy’, Mrs Li said.³¹

In late April 2018, accompanied by local residents, the first author again visited Longmen Village for three consecutive days. The ‘village’ is housed in blocks of residential buildings, which were rumoured to be demolished for further development in the near future. As she told us in 2011, Mrs Li’s convenience shop had already been removed in the second wave of development that got underway in 2011–12 to widen the main thoroughfare, Longmen Avenue, and construct an eco-zone in the northwest approaches to the grottoes. Now the owner of a beauty store, Mrs Li had moved to a gated, urban-looking neighbourhood called Longmen Neighbourhood’s Tangyun Community, equipped with gas pipes for cooking and hot water, a few blocks away from her old neighbourhood. A total of 154 households were relocated there from Longmen Village during the second wave of demolitions.³²

In contrast to the 2011 visit, in 2018 the Longmen Village neighbourhood was teeming with family-run hotels, social services such as purified drinking water distribution sites, convenience and grocery shops, restaurants, kindergartens, and primary and middle schools. The first author was also accompanied to Longmen Village by Mr Liu, an in situ urbanite in his early thirties from nearby Du Village, a village close to the Longmen East High Speed Railway Station. Pointing out the numerous makeshift additions to the villagers' three- or four-storey houses, Mr Liu explained that they were part of a strategy by established residents to maximize their compensation during the coming rounds of relocation. He noted that some villagers had already moved to the Tangyun Community, but were keeping their houses in Longmen Village as rentals. Many other local people confirmed that, as soon as villagers heard about the development plans, they would rush to expand their homes by adding additional levels or internal structures in order to claim extra compensation from the developers. Many of those we spoke to emphasized that they regarded demolition and relocation as an opportunity to get rich, and they were ecstatic if they learned that their old houses were in the demolition zone.³³

Group three: Migrant workers

Fieldwork conducted in the Baoshan District of Shanghai and Saihan District of Hohhot – transition areas between urban and rural – also confirmed the ways in which migrant workers make careful decisions about where to live and work, in response to what they see as the authorities' manipulation of an individual's hukou status.

Baoshan, Shanghai, 2017–18

In her thirties, Mrs He is a professional manicurist/pedicurist managing a franchise for a chain beauty shop in Baoshan, Shanghai. Originally from Shou County in north-central Anhui Province, she has worked in Shanghai for almost 20 years. Her husband is a truck driver. Their only child recently moved together with her in-laws from Shanghai to their hometown to attend primary school.

Working an average of 12 hours a day, with only one day off each week, and taking no holidays except for a couple of days during the Spring Festival, Mrs He allegedly earns over RMB 5000 a month – comparable to an entry-level university faculty salary in Shanghai at face value.³⁴ Mrs He and her husband have both retained their original hukou, and their social and medical insurance is registered in Anhui. According to her, because their hometown in Anhui Province falls within the planned high-speed railway zone, the local villagers are rushing to build houses there so that they can get additional compensation when the demolition and relocation process starts. But, migrant workers are still needed to grow Shanghai's economy. Commenting on inequality, Mrs He remarked:

No Shanghainese is willing to do the kind of manual work that I'm doing. All the lazy locals do is to sit around in the hope that their old houses will fall into the development zone. If that happens, they'd be falling over themselves to negotiate a handsome deal with the government, both in cash and in the shape of several apartments. These days, the government can't afford to demolish those old neighbourhoods, say, along Nanjing Road.³⁵

Like Mrs He, Mr Ding, in his forties, from Heilongjiang Province, Northeast China, also puts in long hours each day, and he works seven days a week. He is married and has a 12-year-old daughter. A micro-entrepreneur, Mr Ding has an associate degree in automation from a Shanghai vocational school. After graduation, he decided to stay on in the municipality. During the conversation, he told us that he was taking 12 examinations towards a BA degree, after which he hoped to pursue an MA in Shanghai. Ding owns an officially registered trading company, and since the late 1990s he has rented a four-square-metre indoor booth at a college service centre in Baoshan, selling stationary, office supplies, and miscellaneous merchandise. Each year he takes around three months off when college students and faculty, his main clients, are on their summer and winter recess. A higher education degree, the payment of local taxes and social insurance, and other factors earn migrant workers the 120 points required for their children to qualify to attend school in Shanghai.³⁶

According to Mr Ding, although his hukou has reverted back to his hometown and he is still working in Shanghai, he has been paying social insurance for nearly 10 years, making him and his family eligible to apply for urban residency status. Once he accumulates sufficient qualification points, they will have access to almost the same range of social services as Shanghainese with a local hukou. He adds that after paying social insurance in the city for 10 years, he will be eligible to receive a Shanghai municipal pension, which is much higher than in most other cities in China – and by then he will no longer be required to live in Shanghai.

The space for his sales booth belongs to the college, which has forced all its tenants to move out for reconstruction but has neglected to find substitute accommodation for those businesses affected. Each year, Mr Ding paid RMB 45,000 in rent for his small booth, and the college demanded a rent increase of RMB 5000. Mr Ding has quietly organized a campaign opposing both the rent increase and the tenants' loss of space in the building, without much success. Now his small booth is closed for reconstruction, and he is an itinerant salesman around the campus.

Also based in Baoshan is Mrs Gui, a woman in her fifties with a middle-school-level education originally from Yancheng, Jiangsu Province. A professional florist, she has run a flourishing business in a busy thoroughfare for 16 years. Her husband helps with restocking the flowers and plants and doing odd jobs. With the shop subject to an annual lease, they are uncertain about their future as a result of the ongoing campaign against illegal buildings in Shanghai. In fact, the shop is an illegal structure leased to them for RMB 6000 per month by the Public Bus Company. We saw exposed electric wires by the entrance outside, and an outdoor faucet without a basin. When business is slow, she and her husband would cook and eat a simple meal onsite. Mindful of the uncertainties surrounding the shop, Mrs Gui is working as hard as she can to maximize their earnings, while readying herself to move to another location if necessary. Besides the shop, the couple also pays a monthly rent of RMB 2400 for their dwelling a few blocks away.

The Guis' 24-year-old daughter was to graduate from a university in Northeast China. Although she failed the Master's programme entrance exam for a university in Shanghai in 2017, she intended to try again in 2018. Each day, the couple starts work at 6 a.m. at the latest and closes the shop around 10 p.m. Mrs Gui wants her daughter to enjoy the benefits of a white-collar life – not like her, doing manual work all year long without a

break. Like the He and Ding families, their hukou, social insurance, and medical insurance are all registered in their hometown. And like most migrant workers in Shanghai who have retained their rural hukou, Mrs Gui plans to retire to her hometown when she and her husband have made enough money. However, she regrets not buying an apartment in Baoshan when housing prices were relatively low.

Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, 2016

Mr Huang (aged 60) and his wife (aged 65) live in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, where we interviewed them in 2016. Of their three children, their son has a casual job at a local vegetable market, one daughter runs a small cell-phone repair shop, and the other is a stay-at-home mother. In 2008 following the death of Mr Huang's father, the couple migrated from their home village to Hohhot with their elder daughter, who was then pregnant. At that time, they were renting a house in a suburban village from where they ran a small, unregistered vegetable business. When the house was threatened with demolition, they knew that as tenants they stood to receive no compensation. To avoid becoming homeless, they made a deposit on a small apartment in a residential area and rented a garage there which they used as a vegetable stall. They were selling vegetables from both the (still intact) village house and the garage. Although the Huangs had sublet their land in their home village, they retained the property in order to keep their hukou-based social insurance. And should their land and home there be requisitioned for development, they would also receive compensation.

Both daughters began work after completing secondary vocational schooling in Hohhot, where they had also met their spouses. The older daughter, who runs a phone repair shop, is married to a Hohhot resident with a high-paying job in the media, while the younger daughter's husband, a migrant from elsewhere in Inner Mongolia, works as a second-hand car dealer.

The Huangs' experience is typical of internal migrants in China. Over recent decades, for many rural youngsters vocational secondary schooling has functioned as a bridge to the urban job market, and also to marriage. With her vocational degree, the older daughter could have switched permanently to an urban hukou, but, like many of our subjects, instead re-registered in her home village to maintain the family's land and insurance rights.

The downside to such arrangements is illustrated by the fact that, at the time of the interview, the Huang family were living precariously, unregistered in the city, and lacking formal work contracts. The senior couple had no business licence for their vegetable stalls. Despite these apparent disadvantages, their informal economic activities collectively yielded the family an income that helped strengthen their foothold in Hohhot. From this perspective, the choices they made as individuals are closely linked to the ambiguity of the rules that supposedly govern life in the city.

The uncertainties as well as the new possibilities that at the same time dishearten and encourage the Huangs and the other families discussed here stem from the official manipulation of social inequality under the 2014–20 New-Type Urbanization Plan and the various regulations deriving from it.³⁷ All urban governments are now required to narrow the gap between permanent residents lacking a local hukou and those who hold it. Those in the former group must be covered by social insurance and other public

services only available to urban residents. The government is acutely aware that by resisting being classified as urban hukou holders, urban dwellers exert pressure on the city government to improve and expand social services. The new rules state that by 2020 the number of urban residents without a local hukou must not exceed 24 per cent, and this figure is planned to drop to 11 per cent by 2030.

Reform in China features a manifold movement towards a controlled release of individual choice. The process, however, drives people to rely on informal or unofficial commercial activities and collectivity, including family, kinship, clientelist, business, hometown, alumni, and veteran networks.³⁸ Small businesses, whether registered or unregistered, and operating in both rural and urban settings, help to meet the demand for services in local markets and to limit the number of people who lack stable employment or viable incomes from other sources. While the authorities condone such activities because the latter alleviate temporary hardship, occasional clampdowns are carried out by local officials who attempt to regulate the creative initiatives of individuals in China's peri-urban environments within an official, regulatory framework.

Conclusion

Are peri-urbanites victims or active agents in their pursuit of new citizenship in contemporary China? Two conclusions can be drawn.

First, the three groups we have identified – relocated agricultural elites, in situ urbanites, and migrant workers – signify the availability of choices for a better life and a full citizenship ranging from adopting a wholly urban lifestyle, maintaining a semi-urban identity, or keeping one's rural roots. Although broadly corresponding to an evolving national planning strategy, the multiple processes at work generate diverse possibilities for the individuals affected and hence throw up an array of individualized opportunities. Consequently, the three groups of peri-urban dwellers at issue all have the potential to become active agents, rather than victims of powerful social and political forces, who are able to pursue their own interests and calculate the costs and benefits of making decisions about their personal futures in a complex and rapidly changing environment.

Second, hukou status inequality can be better described as the controlled release of individualized possibilities – a mechanism that fuels a restless upward mobility in Chinese society, rather than freezing social classification in place. In our latest round of fieldwork, all the interviewees confirmed that having an urban hukou was no longer an important personal goal for them, as those who have gained full urban status can no longer switch back to their agricultural hukou. The ongoing reform of the hukou system and its replacement with a new urban residency status are creating a new situation.

The new national strategy to rejuvenate the countryside further indicates that a new stage of development is underway.³⁹ Young entrepreneurial farmers with advanced vocational training have begun to mobilize villagers, initiating agricultural development projects with state funding. Pooling the land of farming families, paying them for its use and in some cases hiring them as labourers, these entrepreneurs can massively increase the economic returns on the land and hire the services of others with the skills to operate in this new division of labour. The advent of large supply-chain corporations in the agricultural sector is gradually changing the technology, investment structure, labour relations and

markets, directing them towards agro-industry and agri-businesses.⁴⁰ Land consolidation and pressure on absentee villagers to cut their ties with the land will only gain momentum as the economic potential of consolidated land holdings and their capacity for increased technological and financial input emerge as a major driver of development.

De facto citizenship equates with urban residency, and that is the alignment of public policy, social and political rights vis-a-vis other urban residents. Abolishing the hukou status is therefore an important step. The refusal of some to accept urban citizenship at the time of writing (2018) is an element of the individual's effort to negotiate terms – to be afforded conditions at par with those who already hold such a status. As cities face pressure to narrow the gap between permanent residents with and without urban hukou, refusal is a rational individual negotiation strategy to achieve better social insurance conditions as well as a slice of the land transfer dividend.

Against this background, the new arrivals on China's peri-urban fringes are seizing all the opportunities available to them, and doing so for their own advantage. Their behaviour is conditioned by various incentives and their awareness of the fluidity of residential rights, reflecting a kind of strategic thinking that is shaping urbanization patterns. The choices and risks taken by individual actors drive them forward as this process unfolds. Often, their individual gains and progress up the social ladder may not amount to much, merely fleeing from one precarious situation to the next. Yet in most cases these new urbanites are able to make some progress by grasping incentives, receiving compensation, or simply by taking advantage of risky opportunities. Where they are able to create added value, their achievements are often confronted by – and regulated within – newly emerging institutional settings. Motivated individuals are thus playing a pivotal role in carving out spaces for themselves in an urban environment marked by the shifting balance of rights and entitlements between social groups.

This use of inequity in the registration system is shifting constantly among individuals and groups, becoming a major if evolving mechanism for China's ongoing transformation from a mainly rural to a largely urban country; from a largely agricultural to a highly industrialized economy; and from a relatively low-skilled and poorly educated population to a relatively high-skilled and well-educated one. To put it plainly, the collective endeavours of 'selfish man' seem universally to make for progress, whether pursued consciously or unconsciously.

Notes

1. 国家新型城镇化规划(2014–2020年) (National new-type urbanization plan (2014–2020)), 16 March 2014, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm, accessed 20 July 2017.
2. Ibid.; and the plan was followed by 国家新型城镇化综合试点方案 (Comprehensive pilot scheme for the national new-type urbanization), 4 February 2015, <http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/gzdt/201502/W020150204332605546365.pdf>, accessed 20 July 2017.
3. John Friedmann, Four theses in the study of China's urbanization, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30(2), 2006: 440–51.
4. Leslie Shieh, Becoming urban: Rural-urban integration in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, *Pacific Affairs* 84(3), 2011: 475–94; Shenjing He and Desheng Xue, Identity building and communal resistance against landgrabs in Wukan Village, China, *Current Anthropology* 55(S9), 2014:

- S126–37; Giuseppina Siciliano, Rural-urban migration and domestic land grabbing in China, *Population, Space and Place* 20(4), 2014: 333–51; Alvin Y. So, Peasant conflict and the local predatory state in the Chinese countryside, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 34(3–4), 2007: 560–81; and Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
5. Friedmann, Four theses in the study of China's urbanization, 447; John Friedmann, Becoming urban: Periurban dynamics in Vietnam and China – Introduction, *Pacific Affairs* 84(3), 2011: 425–34; and Dong Wang, Restructuring governance in contemporary urban China: Perspectives on state and society, *Journal of Contemporary China* 20(72), 2011: 723–33.
 6. We address one district respectively on the fringe of one first-tier city, Shanghai, and in two third-tier cities, Hohhot and Luoyang. The diversity of local conditions tends to be somewhat underexposed in existing research, because third-tier cities attract less research interest than first- and second-tier cities. The general lack of attention to smaller places can be gleaned from a database search, albeit incomplete, in May 2018 for scholarship on these three locations published in journals indexed in the SSCI and A&HCI between 2006 and 2018: 4463 items were found on Shanghai (of which 11 related to the Baoshan District), 26 on Luoyang, and 10 on Hohhot. Findings from these three different coastal, interior, and frontier cities thus should help mitigate such an imbalanced concentration on first-tier and coastal Chinese cities.
 7. One can obtain a glimpse of the dynamics from the changing expressions about the urbanization process, such as 农业转移人口市民化, literally meaning 'turning rural migrants living in cities into urban residents', first used in *People's Daily* (人民日报) in 2012. The budgetary measures publicized in 2018 boosted the policy importance of this new term; 农业转移人口市民化案例 (Cases of turning rural migrants living in cities into urban residents), December 2016, <http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fzgggz/fzgh/zcfg/201612/W020161219342511160639.pdf>, accessed 30 April 2018; 加快农业转移人口市民化,创新行政管理体制,发改委总结第一批国家新型城镇化综合试点经验 (Accelerate turning rural migrants living in cities into urban residents, innovate administrative management system: The National Development and Reform Commission summarizes experiences of the first group of comprehensive pilot schemes for the national new-type urbanization), 5 May 2018, http://guoqing.china.com.cn/2018-05/05/content_51130600.htm, accessed 5 May 2018; and The State Council 国务院, 国务院关于实施支持农业转移人口市民化若干财政政策的通知 (Notice of the State Council on implementing several financial policies to support turning rural migrants living in cities into urban residents), 5 August 2016, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-08/05/content_5097845.htm, accessed 26 January 2019.
 8. He Zhiwu 何志武 and Zhu Xiuling 朱秀凌, '恶政府'? '弱拆迁户'? – 拆迁冲突议题的媒介建构 ('Evil government'? 'Weak relocated households'? – Media construction of conflict issues in demolition and relocation), *新闻大学* (Journalism quarterly), no. 1, 2014: 76–109.
 9. The current urbanization policy lays the foundation for large urban clusters straddling jurisdictions and for redrawing the lines between urban and rural areas. The latter gears towards a highly capitalized and technologically advanced agriculture, services, tourism, ecological protection, and agriculture-related processing. This vision for a functionally divided future between urban and rural centres already influences policymaking.
 10. Flemming Christiansen, Social division and peasant mobility in mainland China: The implications of the hu-k'ou system, *Issues and Studies* 26(4), 1990: 23–42; and Flemming Christiansen, 'Market transition' in China: The case of the Jiangsu labor market, 1978–1990, *Modern China* 18(1), 1992: 72–93.
 11. Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木, 按照经济规律办事,加快实现四个现代化 (Administer according to economic laws, speed up the four modernizations), *人民日报* (People's daily), 6 October

- 1978; see also Kenneth Lieberthal, The political implications of Document No. 1, 1984, *China Quarterly* 101, 1985: 109–13.
12. To quote Yao Lu, Wenjuan Zheng, and Wei Wang, Migration and popular resistance in rural China: Wukan and beyond, *China Quarterly* 229, 2017: 19: ‘the cellular nature of migrant and rural activism ... is locally oriented, short-lived, and centred on narrow economic claims and remedial measures. These actions rarely escalate into class movements or trans-local struggles, and they are almost never directed at instituting broader changes for improving the collective rights of migrants and peasants.’ For discussions on why collective action often introduced internal divisions among protesters, see Siu Wai Wong, Land requisitions and state–village power restructuring in southern China, *China Quarterly* 224, 2015: 905; and Yanhua Deng, ‘Autonomous redevelopment’: Moving the masses to remove nail households, *Modern China* 43(5), 2017: 494–522.
 13. World Bank, *World Development Report 1990: Poverty*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 139–40; United Nations Development Programme, Human development data (1990–2017), 2018, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>, accessed 7 May 2018.
 14. Avner Greif, Cultural beliefs and the organization of society: A historical and theoretical reflection on collectivist and individualist societies, in Mary C. Brinton and Victor Nee (eds) *The New Institutionalism in Sociology*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, 77–104; Douglass C. North, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, 51 and 154; and Barry Naughton, *Growing Out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform, 1978–1993*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
 15. 国务院批转民政部关于调整建镇标准的报告的通知 (Notice of the State Council on approving and forwarding the report of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on adjusting the standards for setting up townships [issued by order no. 165 of the State Council on 22 November 1984]), 22 November 2016, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-10/20/content_5122304.htm, accessed 28 January 2019.
 16. 国家新型城镇化规划(2014–2020年) is China’s first explicit urbanization programme, officially initiated in 2012 and issued as a planning decision in 2014. There was no formalized ‘old-type’ urbanization policy before this. ‘Small town development’ was considered relocation into non-agricultural rural settings, and 城市化 was a descriptive term rather than a policy aim.
 17. *Ibid.*; and 国家新型城镇化综合试点方案.
 18. Chuanbo Chen and C. Cindy Fan, China’s hukou puzzle: Why don’t rural migrants want urban hukou?, *The China Review* 16(3), 2016: 9–39.
 19. 中共中央国务院关于实施乡村振兴战略的意见 (Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on implementing the rural revitalization strategy), 4 February 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-02/04/c_1122366449.htm, accessed 2 May 2018.
 20. Yang Chao 杨超, 重点大学‘穷孩子’占比为何一路下滑 (Why does the proportion of ‘poor children’ in key universities decline?), *中国经济导报* (China economic herald), 8 September 2011, B07. The decreasing number of rural students enrolled at first-tier Chinese universities such as Peking University and Tsinghua University has given rise to concerns over the excessive concentration of educational resources in cities at the expense of rural areas. However, educational placements are not fixed, so that individuals studying at a less prestigious university can advance on the basis of academic performance to a postgraduate programme at a higher-rated university.
 21. As of 2015, the proportion of non-college-bound high school graduates in cities was very close to the figure for rural areas. See Yang Dongping 杨东平, 让更多的农村学生能上好大学 (Allow more students from rural villages to go to better universities), *当代教育家* (Contemporary educator), no. 4, 2015: 77.

22. Fictitious names are used for most of the individuals named in this study. Conversations were conducted in April 2018.
23. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, 199.
24. His wife, also originally from the countryside, works for the same agency.
25. She is the couple's second child; they were allowed to have a second child because their first-born son had a birth defect which made him unable to speak.
26. The Chinese government owns all urban land by default.
27. 2017年呼和浩特市常住人口311.48万人 (Hohhot's permanent population stood at 3.1148 million in 2017), 呼和浩特市统计局 (Hohhot bureau of statistics), 12 February 2018, http://tjj.huhhot.gov.cn/hhhtjj/show_news.asp?id=1896, accessed 30 April 2018.
28. 农业转移人口市民化案例, 66–9. Continuous and locally specific changes have already made significant parts of the hukou system obsolete. The trend is to replace the system with a new registration system for permanent residents, while maintaining temporary residence for groups not meeting the criteria for social insurance and certain other entitlements.
29. They are Longmen Village, Gaozhuang Village, Sigou Village, Zhanggou Village, Weiwan Village, Guozhai Village, Dongcaodian Village, and Xicaodian Village.
30. Dong Wang, Internationalizing heritage: UNESCO and China's Longmen Grottoes, *China Information* 24(2), 2010: 123–47.
31. Conversation with Mrs Li in her shop outside the Longmen Grottoes, 4 January 2011.
32. 西夹后片区国有土地拆迁评估 (Impact assessment of demolition and relocation on state-owned land in the area behind Xijia), 26 December 2013, <http://www.lmsk.gov.cn/news/show-570.aspx>, last accessed 24 April 2018 [no longer available].
33. Sources provided by Mr Lao on 13 June 2018 confirmed the profits (more than RMB 100,000 within five years) earned by villagers following the same strategy in Shijiatun Village in Luoyang.
34. Mrs He does not enjoy the full social insurance package of employees and so has greater risks in terms of health insurance and pension entitlements. On the other hand, our experience has informed us that gross indications of incomes among micro-entrepreneurs tend to be underestimates, so we caution against a literal interpretation.
35. Conversation recorded in Baoshan, Shanghai, 29 April 2018.
36. 上海市居住证管理办法(沪府令58号) (Measures for the administration of Shanghai residence permits (order no. 58 of the Shanghai Municipal People's Government)), 1 December 2017, <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/nw2/nw2314/nw2319/nw12344/u26aw54292.html>, accessed 7 May 2018.
37. 内蒙古自治区城镇体系规划2015–2030年 (Plan for the urban system of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (2015–2030)), 22 February 2016, <http://www.nmg.gov.cn/wz/yjzj/201603/P020160329544606799011.pdf>, last accessed 2 May 2018 [no longer available].
38. Thomas B. Gold, After comradeship: Personal relations in China since the Cultural Revolution, *China Quarterly* 104, 1985: 657–75.
39. 中共中央 国务院关于实施乡村振兴战略的意见.
40. On the convergence of China's agricultural production with domestic and international markets in terms of standards, see Louis Augustin-Jean and Lei Xie, Food safety, agro-industries, and China's international trade: A standard-based approach, *China Information* 32(3), 2018: 400–22.

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