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# The making of a skilled worker: The transnational mixed embeddedness of migrant workers<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Migrant workers' employment pathways are mainly analysed by observing their behaviour in receiving societies.

In dialogue with critical studies of mobility, migration, and skill, we argue that the 'transnational mixed embeddedness' approach, used to analyse migrant businesses, should extend to include migrant workers.

Based on multi-sited ethnography, we discuss the phenomenon of Chinese migrant workers in Italy who exploit the transnationally embedded opportunities to access training courses in China.

We discuss the transnational workers' agency in circumnavigating socially constructed notions of training and skill, and stress the transformative logic of the migrant trajectories as transnational mobility influences the trainees' perspectives.

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## 1. Introduction

A rich body of literature discusses migrant entrepreneurs and the way they manage to start and expand their businesses, also by making use of transnational resources and opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> Antonella Ceccagno and Ru Gao are joint first authors.

Unlike transnational entrepreneurs, the employment pathways of migrant workers are mainly analysed only by observing their behaviour in receiving societies.

Migrant workers' trajectories in terms of transnational mobility, the mobilisation of social networks, the transnational acquisition of new skills, and agency in accessing different labour market opportunities are an understudied topic. Similarities with the migrant entrepreneurs' mobility, transnational reach, and ultimately, transnational mixed embeddedness are overlooked. We aim to bridge this gap in academic literature, and we do so by concentrating on the migrant workers' transnationally constructed acquisition of skills, focusing on Chinese nationals living in Italy. With its more than 300,000 Chinese nationals living in the country (Istat 2021), Italy stands out as one of the leading destination countries for Chinese migrants in Europe. The Chinese make up one of the four largest groups of immigrants in the country (Romania, Albania, Morocco, China) (DGIPI 2020). In 2019, migrants made up almost 11 percent (i.e. 2.5 million) of the workforce in Italy. The vast majority of migrants in Italy are economically emplaced as employees: statistics report the percentage is as high as 87.1 percent (IDOS 2014; Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione (DGIPI 2020). The number of migrants who run their own business is far lower. Chinese nationals own 53,297 activities; they are the second largest group of migrant entrepreneurs, after those from Morocco (DGIPI 2020). Among the Chinese citizens living in Italy, the percentage of business owners rose steadily from 14.01 percent in 2012 to 17.70 percent in 2019 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche sociali (MLPS 2013; 2019; DGIPI 2020).

Scholars have singled out two main modes of emplacement of Chinese migrants in Italy: being employed as a worker in Chinese-run firms, or running an individual business (Blanchard and Maffeo 2011; Cologna 2005). Generally, first generation Chinese migrants have been active for decades in Chinese-run workshops in manufacturing industries where an extremely flexible work regime is the rule. In the last few decades, Chinese migrants have increasingly moved from manufacturing into the trade and service industries, both as business owners and as workers. In 2008, 42 percent of Chinese-owned businesses in Italy were in the textile, clothing, and footwear manufacturing industries; in 2018, only 26.1 percent of Chinese-owned businesses were involved in manufacturing (MLPS 2019). The reason why is that many were moving to working in catering and other service industries: in fact, their percentage has increased from less than 12 percent in 2008 to 36.9 percent in 2018. Jobs in these sectors are attracting more and more Chinese migrants of younger generations.

Transnational activities run by Chinese entrepreneurs are by no means a new phenomenon: the greatest rise in Chinese-run transnational businesses was visible at the turn of the XXI century

when China became the so-called "factory of the world" and transnational traders based in Italy first emerged and developed trades connecting some areas in China – mainly in Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong provinces - with Rome, and from Rome with markets in most of Southern and Western Europe. In the wake of this evolution, a cascade of new jobs as wholesalers and retailers of goods imported from China became available for many other Chinese migrants in Europe (Ceccagno 2017).

In this paper, we focus analytical attention not on the transnational activities of Chinese entrepreneurs but of workers, shedding light on the recent phenomenon of young Chinese migrant workers exploiting the transnationally embedded opportunity to access training courses in their country of origin. Their transnational skill training journey is pursued in order to achieve occupational mobility in the country of settlement, where they expect to move from being an apprentice to a skilled worker. Their transnational skill training process consists of three stages: a short-period of apprenticeship in Italy to gain basic knowledge of the work settings; short-term intensive training courses in China; and re-entry into the Italian labour market as skilled workers.

This is a recent phenomenon that has not been discussed before and has no parallel in any other European countries where large numbers of Chinese diasporics live. The fact that it only takes place in Italy, or has not yet happened elsewhere, is probably linked to the relatively greater number of Chinese migrant workers living in Italy in comparison with the rest of Europe.

Based on multi-sited ethnographic work, we offer a detailed analysis of the hurdles and frictions migrant workers face when they enter the (Italian) labour market and their subsequent transnational navigation to circumvent the country's requirements. We argue that the workers' mobilisation of transnational resources to search for occupational mobility through transnational training is similar, to a certain extent, to that required for the activation and expansion of transnational businesses. Just as in the cases of transnational migrant entrepreneurs, in fact, migrant workers start by singling out the transnationally available opportunities, resources and risks, and strategically match their personal capital with the transnationally embedded opportunity structures. We aim to draw attention to and theorise the transnational mixed embeddedness of migrant workers. Building on the body of scholarship that proposes to combine the concepts of migrants' transnationalism with the concept of mixed embeddedness in the analysis of transnational entrepreneurs, we suggest that scholars should broaden their analytical horizons to include transnational workers in the transnational mixed embeddedness approach: our empirical findings, in fact, clearly show that the line separating the two groups as mobile transnational actors is often blurred.

Thus, the case of the transnationally mobile Chinese migrant workers discussed here also enables us to move away from the prevailing approach that tends either to analyse transnational migrant workers only in the context of the receiving country or else to describe transnational workers as strictly directed from above by the state and by management. This article, therefore, provides a thought-provoking basis for questioning the puzzling separation of transnational migrant entrepreneurs and transnational migrant workers.

We also draw attention to the strong transformative dimension of transnational mobility pursued and undertaken to acquire new skills, showing that the transnational workers' transnational displacement, as short-term as it can be, influences their aspirations and perspectives (Schapendonk et al. 2018). By doing so, we contribute to the scholarly debate which argues the case for a dialogue between migration, mobility and skills.

## 2. Moving forward: Transnational mixed embeddedness extended to transnational migrant workers

Back in the 1990s, *Nations Unbound*, the seminal book by Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994), put forward the concept of migrant transnationalism, arguing that migrants build social fields across geographic, political, and cultural borders. Over time, with reference to this concept, the "transnational social field perspective" has emerged which is meant to shed light on the interconnections of every type that link the migrants' place of origin to migrants in their destination areas (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), "in contexts in which the state shapes but does not contain linkages and movements" (Glick Schiller and Levitt 2006: 5). Glick Schiller (2013: 5) describes a transnational social field as a "network of networks of unequal power".

At the same time, a rich literature emerged on the entrepreneurship developed by migrants. The conceptualisation that has become the standard reference for analysing migrant entrepreneurship centres on the "mixed embeddedness" of immigrant firms. It proposes to combine "the micro-level of the individual entrepreneur and their resources, with the meso-level of the local opportunity structure and [...] the macro-institutional framework" (Kloosterman 2010: 27–28). Related research clarifies that the key for immigrant entrepreneurs to start and expand their enterprise is to match the resources accessible to them with the opportunity structures in the host country (Kloosterman and Rath 2001).

In itself, the mixed embeddedness approach focuses on the migrants' country of residence only. More recently, many scholars suggest incorporating the transnational scale of the migrant entrepreneurial experience (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013; Bagwell 2018; Solano 2020).

Since "international migration inherently produces cross-border ties" (Waldinger 2017:8), opportunity structures accessible to migrants are also shaped by transnational connections and resources (Plüss 2013). "Transnational mixed embeddedness" has thus emerged as a concept that expands the researcher's analytical focus to include the migrant entrepreneur's country of residence, the country of origin, and sometimes also third countries, thus moving beyond the traditional dichotomy between home and host country. Some scholars underline the interconnectedness of the transnational and other scales of analysis; methodologically, they suggest avoiding a focus that "isolate(s) the transnational networks into a separate level of analysis" (Wahlbeck 2018: 77).

Building on Chen and Tan (2009), Solano (2016), and Bagwell (2018), Wahlbeck (2018) suggests analysing migrant businesses by combining the two approaches briefly described above, i.e. the transnational social field perspective, or a perspective focusing on the agency of migrants at different geographical scales, with the "transnational mixed embeddedness" of migrant entrepreneurs. Related studies show that insights can emerge by bridging these two bodies of literature that are usually discussed separately (see also Barberis and Solano 2018).

We propose extending this transnational mixed embeddedness approach to include transnational migrants who are not entrepreneurs but act transnationally to gain better access to the job market. In fact, in much the same way as migrant entrepreneurs, migrants in search of training that could help them find a better job as employees do not necessarily need to search for available resources only within the society of settlement but can also extend their search for training elsewhere, especially when transnational networks facilitate a transnational exploration of the training and job market. At the same time, they face a wide range of constraints and opportunities as much as transnational entrepreneurs do. Below, therefore, we describe the efforts of these migrants to gain various types of competencies transnationally and also test how productive combining the concepts of transnational social field approach and the transnational mixed embeddedness one can be when discussed in relation to workers.

Analytically, the transnational mobility of workers is a phenomenon mainly discussed with the focus on different aspects from those analysed here. Most studies, in fact, focus on the employment patterns in receiving societies. For instance, scholars explore how transnational mobility constraints migrant workers' employment pathways by de-skilling them in the host society's labour market (e.g. Vickers et al. 2019; Tseng 2020). Other studies describe the migrant workers' re-skilling process through on-the-job training in the host society (Hagan, Lowe and Quingla 2011). The focus, therefore, remains on workers' modes of emplacement in the receiving country. To date, research on how migrant workers strategically coordinate

transnational resources and opportunities to facilitate their economic emplacement in the receiving societies remains limited. As far as Asia is concerned, transnational workers are consistently analysed as a global workforce whose im/mobility is orchestrated from above by the relevant states and their agencies (Xiang 2012, Xiang and Lindquist 2014). This extends also to the case of Chinese workers working in Chinese projects in Africa (Fei 2020). Likewise, the mobility of transnationally posted and agency workers within Europe is discussed as being in the hands of temporary work agencies and multinational companies (Caro et al. 2015). Workers, from this perspective, do not actively use their transnational networks but are moved transnationally in relation to other interests and actors. Only a few scholars make reference to the migrants' ability to mobilise some transnationally acquired resources, such as their knowledge about the labour market in different countries and work experience, to increase their 'self-tailored mobility' (Alberti 2014; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2016; Ceccagno and Sacchetto 2020).

Using this line of inquiry, we offer new empirical findings on the workers' mobilisation of resources through transnational mobility with the aim of acquiring the skills that could facilitate better inclusion in the job market of the country of settlement.

### 3. Mobility, migration, networking, and skills acquisition

The dichotomous approach that highlights the transnational mixed embeddedness of entrepreneurs but ignores that this very concept can apply to transnational workers, can also be found in the debate on skill acquisition and validation, as many scholars only consider the highly skilled to the exclusion of the less skilled; this is also found in the gap between mobility and migration whereby scholars tend to consider 'mobility' as the preserve of the highly skilled while 'migration' is for the poor who hope to settle in a new country. Our paper is in dialogue with the scholars whose research defies such a binary thinking: our analysis of the migrant workers acting and acquiring skills within a transnational social space while living in a foreign country indicates the need for a dialogue between mobility studies and migration studies.

We respond to Parvati Raghuram's argument (2021) to reorient research on skilled migration so that it includes less skilled migrants. The case discussed here is an interesting one in terms of geographies of skills – the spaces, times, and networks through which skills are accrued, claimed, and recognised (Raghuram 2021). In fact, those looking for skill acquisition are less skilled workers, while the literature tends to deal with highly skilled workers; furthermore, in this case, the spatialities of skills acquisition – and the mobility involved - take an unusual turn



in that workers go back to their country of origin to acquire the skills needed to get better jobs in the receiving country. Circulation between countries of origin and countries of migration is usually discussed in terms of return, or pointing to the nexus between migration and development – thus, essentially, in relation to entrepreneurs, scientists, and other highly skilled categories. Alternatively, scholars discuss the transnational circulation of unskilled workers under strict conditions posed by the receiving states. In contrast, we discuss a phenomenon where the circulation between the country of origin and the country of settlement is undertaken by less skilled workers, and largely rests on their agency.

Moreover, our empirical findings are in dialogue with Schapendonk (2015), who points to the processual character of networking. Networks are not pre-defined sets of static elements but are dynamic, ever-changing and leverageable; they play a crucial, if sometimes ambiguous, role in the workers' process of defining, setting, and moving towards their goals. Our ethnography shows that networks are important in the entire process of skills acquisition, from the evaluation on which spaces and institutions are more suited for skill acquisition to the decision to search for the resources needed to make the project come true. Once decisions about trajectories are taken, and skills are learned, the skilled workers analysed here have different capabilities, increased and differently articulated social networks and therefore new perspectives and expectations. In this way, we also build on Moret's argument (2017) that mobility should be considered a type of capital, given that in the process of being transnationally mobile, people acquire technical and cognitive skills that potentially facilitate future movements.

Furthermore, we contribute to the debate by embedding skills and skill acquisition. The migrant workers' transnational mobility discussed here springs, mainly, from the strict requirements on skill acquisition in the host country, based on EU regulations, that migrant workers compare with the more relaxed rules for training in China.

#### 4. Transnationalism of the Chinese migrants living in Italy

The Chinese migrants and their descendants living in Italy display a wide variety of social, cultural, and economic transnational ties, mainly connecting their country of origin with the country of settlement and involving other areas of the world. The persistence of strong transnational networks with the sending country also stems from the working arrangements in Italy and, more generally, the opportunities emerging both globally and in the countries/localities connected by the networks. One characteristic of the businesses run by the

Chinese immigrants after their arrival in Italy – that remained unchanged until the mid-2010s – is that they only hired Chinese workers who arrived in Italy mainly through the active use of networks linking the Chinese in Italy to would-be workers in their local area in the country of origin, mainly in Zhejiang and Fujian provinces (Pieke et al. 2004). Therefore, the mode of embeddedness of the Chinese in Italy as subcontractors operating ethnicised workshops in the Italian fashion industry is one element that mattered in building and maintaining strong transnational ties over time.

Transnational networks play a crucial role also in relation to the practice of sending new-born children back to China and bringing them back to Italy only when they reach school age or, in the case of workers who have recently emigrated, of leaving the children with their grandparents in the areas of origin in China until the parents are able to open their own business in Italy or, at least, have a more stable income. The young Chinese in search of skills transnationally, which are discussed in this paper, have mostly followed this trajectory, arriving in Italy years after their parents.

The importance of transnational ties linking migrants with the areas of origin in China was evident at the turn of the XXI century, when the liberalisation of import-export in China – previously controlled by the state and its local agencies – became a powerful driver for the emergence of transnational entrepreneurship. Growing numbers of Chinese migrants living in Italy started their careers as transnational traders. Italy is an outstanding example in Europe for observing how Chinese migrant transnational connections with the booming areas of origin in China have contributed to reshaping the Chinese migrants' opportunity structures in Europe (Ceccagno 2017).

Opportunities for Chinese transnational entrepreneurship also stemmed from the emergence of the industrial district of Prato, Italy, as the main centre for the production of low-end fast fashion in Europe, managed by Chinese entrepreneurs. Essentially, a process has taken place whereby the Chinese-run fashion industry has played a pivotal role in further strengthening transnational business ties on the one hand, linking the Chinese migrants in Prato with China and Turkey as the places where Prato's fast fashion firms would source their raw materials – such as textiles and accessories - and, on the other hand, by creating business ties among the Chinese diasporics in Europe, i.e., those producing garments in Italy and those marketing the garments in other European countries. A global production network has thus emerged from below, largely dependent on intra-Chinese ties (Lan and Zhu 2014) even though ethnic Italians, as well as ethnic Chinese, also participated in the business and the networks (Ceccagno 2017). Insofar as other localities and other actors, as well as the migrants' sending and receiving

country, are involved, these cases fit into the classification of "multifocal" transnational mixed embeddedness proposed by Solano (2016).

It is against such a background of extended and constantly renewed transnational networks connecting different areas that the transnational search for training and mobility of young Chinese living in Italy takes place.

A caveat is needed here. While stressing the transnational social fields linking Chinese migrants in Italy to China, we do not suggest that the Chinese immigrants are only part of ethnic, bounded networks (Barberis and Solano 2018). Instead, we point to the multiple opportunity structures emerging in the last decades whereby global dynamics – such as China's new global positioning or the gap opening for immigrant businesses in the Italian garment industry - have opened up pathways for economic success largely based on the use of and active participation in multiple networks including transnational ones. To put it another way, in the last decades, migrants have found themselves in historical circumstances where the economic process of globalisation and transnational fields have had a mutually reinforcing effect. This has greatly facilitated their position as transnational entrepreneurs, offering a competitive edge to those better equipped – in terms of capital and access to networks - to take advantage of the ongoing global changes. Chinese workers also benefited from these historical circumstances, as some became small traders in Italy, while others moved to other European countries where business perspectives were more enticing. However, the transnational mobility of Chinese workers for the purpose of training so that newly acquired skills can be made use of in the labour market in the receiving country, has only appeared in the last few years and involves the opportunity structures embedded in China and Italy. We will discuss this after presenting our methods.

## 5. Methods and outline of the interviewees

This paper draws on data collected mainly through qualitative methods<sup>2</sup>. Between June 2017 and September 2020, we conducted 65 in-depth interviews with Chinese migrants living in Italy, six of which with key informants. We interviewed 29 Chinese workers, 29 Chinese business owners, and one unemployed person. Of the 29 workers interviewed, eight had travelled to China for skill acquisition and had experienced upward mobility upon return, thanks to their transnational training experiences. While these are the main focus of this paper,

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<sup>2</sup> The ethnographic work was conducted by author B.

many other interviewees also shared their knowledge and experiences about the new trend of temporarily moving to China for skill acquisition.

Interviews were conducted, through snowball sampling mainly in the Veneto region, in Northern Italy, a region with a significant presence of Chinese migrant workers. In order to trace the labour mobility of the interviewees, some workers were interviewed again after a few months. We also collected qualitative data through multi-sited ethnographic observation and participant observation in a middle school and a wholesale centre in the suburbs of Padua and in a Chinese-run garment factory in Prato, Italy, as well as in Wenzhou and Qingtian, China, the hometown of most of the Chinese migrants interviewed. Data collected made it possible to trace Chinese migrant workers' employment mobility from apprentices to skilled workers. Insofar as the ethnographic research has followed the trainees in Italy and in China this paper points to the time and spatial dimensions of the phenomenon.

In the analysis, we choose not to adopt a rigid categorisation of skilled workers (on the social construction of skill, see Liu-Farrer et al. 2021). Our analysis focuses on how migrant workers' occupational mobility is influenced by their "strategies in relation to the labour market" that entails a dynamic social construction of the concept of skills and the skilled workforce (Alberti 2014: 869; Hagan, Lowe and Quingla 2011). As a result, following our interviewees' classification (including workers and employers), we considered "skilled" to refer to those they identified as "shugong". In relation to employment negotiations among Chinese working in Italy, "shugong" means skilled workers who have "practised dexterities required to carry on a specific branch of production" or service (Braverman 1974: 443).

Among our interviewees, migrant workers engaged in transnational skill training are usually under 35 years old. Most of them arrived in Italy at middle-school age and were sent to middle school in Italy without being given any appropriate language and cultural support. As a result, they were less likely to continue or complete studying at high-school in Italy due to poor language and cultural skills. In the meantime, these young Chinese migrants are usually reluctant to work and live in Chinese-run manufacturing workshops under an extremely flexible work regime like their parents (Gao and Sacchetto 2018). Generally, the transnational skill acquisition these people pursue in China involves skills required for working in the service sector, such as body care, electronic repairing, and catering. Generally, training for activities related to body care tends to attract female workers, while their male counterparts are more concentrated in electronic repairing and catering.

## 6. Institutional and job market constraints on skill acquisition in Italy

In Chinese manufacturing businesses, workers are required to work and live inside or close to the workplace to follow a work schedule based on the market demand for increasing tight lead times (Ceccagno 2007). Until the mid-2010s, the workforce was chosen on the basis of ethnicity, with Chinese sub-contractors only employing Chinese nationals as workers; in the last few years, a multi-ethnicisation of the workforce is underway, with Chinese employers also hiring natives and immigrants from a range of nationalities.

The practice of hiring co-ethnics for a job in contracting workshops in the Italian fashion industry has greatly facilitated the inclusion of newly arrived Chinese migrants with little work experience and limited skills. Traditionally, newly arrived migrant workers employed in odd jobs would also be expected to learn from more skilled workers, often from those originating from their same areas in China (Cologna 2005). This "learning-by-doing" period was a time of apprenticeship characterised by poor pay or, in some cases, no pay, as explained by a former garment factory owner, who clearly discusses the working conditions from the employer's point of view:

*We taught them without charge, and for this learning period [that] might be three months, we did not charge them for the teaching, and they learned skills while working without payment [...].*

Therefore, an essential precondition for workers accepting this poorly paid or unpaid apprenticeship was that they could learn as much as possible in a short period and improve their skills at work so that they could quickly move from being an apprentice to being a skilled worker.

Things are changing with the second generation, both in terms of searching for jobs and on-the-job training. In fact, youngsters starting their search for a job are reluctant to put up with poor working conditions in Chinese-run manufacturing workshops and many choose to be employed in the service sector. Like many others looking for a job in the trade and service industries, all the Chinese migrant workers discussed in this paper have experienced working in Chinese-run shops only, even though Chinese shops also tend to employ some workers from different national backgrounds.

In terms of training, the workers entering the service industry face new challenges in the process of skill acquisition. In fact, the "learning-by-doing" mode of skill acquisition prevailing in the manufacturing sectors does not apply to the service industry, for a host of reasons.

First, apprentices are somehow prevented from undergoing training and improving their skills at work. Most of them, in fact, are required to directly serve the clients at work. Under such circumstances, they have less opportunities to acquire the "manual dexterities" that are otherwise accessible in manufacturing workshops. Second, many skilled co-ethnic colleagues are reluctant to teach those wishing to learn skills as they perceive them as competitors who, by becoming skilled as well, will alter the market supply and demand for skilled workers, thus reducing their bargaining power vis-à-vis their (co-ethnic) employers.

Such a preoccupation on the part of the skilled workers, in turn, rests on the fact that the ratio of skilled to unskilled workers in shops providing services is different from that in manufacturing workshops as, due to their small size, shops only hire a limited number of skilled workers. For instance, Lu, a 19 years old female Chinese barber, recalled:

*Before, I was an apprentice in a barber's shop. My teacher was a skilled woman hairdresser. She used to yell at me and "repress" me. [...] Sometimes, she just did not let me practice even though I knew how to. She was not even the boss.*

As this case shows, Chinese barber apprentices like Lu in shops run by co-ethnics usually have to start their career by spending a long-time practising, step by step, a wide range of highly specified peripheral tasks, such as shampooing, colouring etc. Before being hired as a hairdresser whose job is cutting and styling hair, these practitioners need their co-ethnic employers and/or skilled workers acknowledge that they have learned basic cutting and styling skills during their apprenticeship. As revealed by Lu, as well as some other interviewees, it is widespread for skilled workers to "repress" co-ethnic apprentices by "slowing (or discouraging) the entry of new practitioners" (Attewell 1990: 435), thus lengthening the apprenticeship period. Lave and Wenger (1991:14) point out that newcomers with little access to full participation in the "actual practices of an expert" could hardly learn the skills, even though apprentices would try to learn by observing the skilled workers' practices (see Brown and Duguid 1993, Marchand 2008; Bharatan, Swan and Oborn 2021).

Interestingly, we were also able to interview Lu's employer, who is also a Chinese migrant, and he made it clear that apprentices have to endure the segmentation of tasks, even though this might prevent them from becoming familiar with other tasks in the workplace, because employers are aware that once apprentices become "shugong" (skilled workers) through learning-by-doing they would either bargain for a higher salary or search for another job elsewhere.

*If I hire a shampooer, the salary starts from like 800 euros per month. [...] I would never let him/her try and practice any other things. You, as a shampooer, only need to wash the hair for clients.*

By vertically segmenting the apprentices' tasks, the employer, as well as skilled workers employed in the same store, also try to postpone – or even avoid- the moment when the newcomers should "progress from peripheral to full participation" (Bharatan, Swan and Oborn 2021: 3). Our ethnographic work shows that in these service industries within ethnic work settings, the opportunities for young apprentices to practise and improve skills at work are remarkably limited by the restrictive practices and hierarchical arrangements imposed by skilled workers and employers.

As an alternative to "learning-by-doing", workers can access training courses organised by national or local institutions in Italy. However, our interviewees made it clear that most training courses organised by Italian institutions set high requirements in terms of language competence, time, and costs that make them inaccessible to most Chinese apprentices. For example, to become a qualified beautician in the Veneto region, applicants are required to undergo two years of institutional training and one year's apprenticeship supervised by experts or shopkeepers who hold the required institutional qualifications in professional settings, as well as supplementary theoretical training organised by local government (for alternative, but similarly restrictive modes of training, see Portal of Veneto 2021). This situation is found in many other EU countries because professions like hairdressing, bakery, and beauty therapy are "regulated professions" that require practitioners to obtain a specific degree and qualifications issued by the relevant institutions (Your Europe 2022). For instance, a Chinese migrant female beautician recalled that:

*The training courses in Europe cost too much. I attended a two-day training course [in Italy], and I paid two thousand euros. A similar training course in China costs only something more than one thousand yuan [from 131 euros to 260 euros][...] It is difficult to obtain the beautician qualification [in Italy][...] You have to study for three years.[...] It is difficult for me who already have the skills but do not speak Italian well. It is even much more difficult for him [my husband] who has only limited knowledge about the skills and the Italian language.*

Thus, the constraints in accessing the wider labour market in Italy together with the vertical segmentation in the ethnicised shops, based on skill competencies, emerge from our ethnography as conditions that hinder the Chinese workers' attempts to acquire skills that could bring about a relatively fast upward occupational mobility. Skills, skilled workers, and also

skill acquisition opportunities are clearly socially constructed concepts, deeply embedded both in the ethnic work settings and in the institutional context in the host country, that "prescribe, prevail and preclude" who can access which skills (Raghuram 2021:1), and by doing so have the power over the social mobility of migrants (Schapendonk et al. 2018). It is against the background of such a restrictive opportunity structure that the young Chinese apprentices choose to search for more accessible and short-term intensive training courses in China.

## 7. Networking and transnational mobility for skill acquisition

Our fieldwork suggests that those searching for training in China are usually younger migrants who have just started or are yet to start their apprenticeship period. They describe their choice as stemming from a practical comparison of opportunities to improve their skills in Italy and China, as recounted by Zg, a 23-year cell phone repairer:

*How did I learn to repair cell phones? First, I came here to Italy, and then I found a job [...] as an apprentice in a repair shop. Afterwards, I found it useless to continue working as an apprentice. So, I went to China [...] to take a three-month course and then I returned to Italy. [...] As an apprentice, you could only learn by observing carefully how they [experienced and skilled technicians] repair cell phones because they would not tell you and teach you all the skills. [...] Instead, the course in the training centre in China starts with learning the essential theory. [...] Step by step, you then have the chance to practice. [...] As an apprentice, my salary used to be 300 euros and 600 euros in the end [...]. However, after coming back from China after the training course, I can earn 1200 or 1300 euros a month.*

This interview outlines the three coordinated steps in this transnational training process: a short-period apprenticeship in the co-ethnic businesses in Italy; months of intensive learning of a craft and practice of that craft in the training centres in China; promotion to the role of skilled worker in a co-ethnic business in Italy after the training journey to China.

Some interviewees explain that the period of preliminary apprenticeship in Italy turned out to be crucial in facilitating formal learning through an intensive training course in China as it had provided some practical knowledge about the general work settings. Other interviewees point out that, in itself, completing an intensive transnational training course in China was not always readily accepted as a proof of having skills by the Chinese who employed them after they returned to Italy: in fact, employers still required those who had attended training courses in China to go through a period of apprenticeship, even though a notably shorter period, to demonstrate their newly acquired skill at work.



Transnational mobility from Italy to China to acquire skills is facilitated by the existence and the growing role of new structures geared towards providing vocational skills in China. These are the vocational, educational, and training schools (VETs). The VETs market in China is largely supported by the Chinese government (Stewart 2015; Chinese State Council 2018; 2019). At the national scale, policies have been enacted to promote the VETs system to upskill the workforce for ongoing national industrialisation. At the local scale, authorities have been channelling the younger generations, especially second-generation domestic rural migrants, into specific skill training schools as a strategy to tackle the "urgent demand" of the local labour market, delay the social pressure caused by unemployment, and maintain social stability (Lan 2014; Ling 2015). From 2018 to 2020, the growth in the rate of enrollments in secondary vocational schools outpaced that in corresponding academic schools (National Bureau of Statistics of China, (NBSC 2021). A similar increase has been noticed in the first decade after China entered into the WTO (NBSC 2011; Hansen and Woronov 2013). Every year, a burgeoning training market like this produces a huge ready-to-use workforce for the factories and enterprises in China. Against such a background, some Chinese migrants in Italy recently recognise the opportunities and resources embedded in China's institutional and socio-economic context and undertake to incorporate the training infrastructures in China in their transnational skill acquisition networks.

All in all, our interviewees found the intensive training courses in China worthwhile: they described the VETs as much more affordable in terms of time and costs than the courses organised by the Italian institutions. The transnational experience of skills acquisition helped them obtain certain skills and enabled them to get employment as skilled workers instead of enduring a "useless" apprenticeship in Italy. Thus, different conditions for accessing institutionalised training offered in the EU and China are at the basis of the workers' transnational skill acquisition journey.

Interestingly, transnational mobility to attend VETs is kept going by transnational/translocal social fields linking the Chinese living in China and those in Italy who participate in the circulation of information on the opportunities for training in China and help transform a potential opportunity into the chance to actually grab that opportunity. Our fieldwork shows that some transnational apprentices were trained in the VETs in their hometown in Qingtian, or Wenzhou, where they participate in a wide range of reliable social networks. Others, instead, were trained in cities where VETs specialising in specific skills are considered more prestigious than VETs elsewhere. For example, the cellphone repairer Zg, whose social networks and family were mainly in Zhejiang province, chose a training school in Guangzhou, a city with a

robust electronics manufacturing industry and related training systems. After returning to Italy, based on his successful transnational training experiences, Zg helped his brother to find a bubble tea training course in Shanghai.

Some other aspirant transnational trainees access information via new networks, for instance by making use of knowledge on the topic available in online forums in Chinese developed by and for Chinese migrants in Italy such as huarenjie.com. In these online forums, they ask for advice about the feasibility of their transnational training project, including transnational trainees who have graduated and other Chinese living in Italy, but also those living in the Chinese cities where they plan to undergo training. For instance, an online discussion initiated by a Chinese apprentice in a Chinese-run barber's shop in Italy involved the following conversation between the apprentice and a graduated transnational trainee:

*Apprentice's question: I want to return to China to learn hairdressing. Anyone could recommend some good schools?*

*Graduate transnational trainee's answer: it depends on the regions [where you want to go]. If you go to Southern China, Shanghai and Guangzhou might be good choices; if you go to Northern China, then Beijing! I think back to China, we could receive more solid training. Although we might have to pay for the course, we get systematic theoretical learning and practice. Here in Italy, it all depends on what kind of mentor workers we could meet and whether they want to teach us. And, we have to start from washing the hair for clients. (<https://www.huarenjie.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=7977560>)*

Thus, transnational workers' agency also emerges in terms of relational efforts and strategies in accessing, creating/renovating, expanding, maintaining, and mobilising their social networks. Our findings confirm that networking capacity is an individual effort and a connectivity skill.

## 8. Disruptions in the process of transnational skill acquisition

Access to VETs in China, however, is not for everybody as the recognition and valorisation of transnational opportunities depends on the individual's social, financial and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The extent to which our interviewees could make use of transnational networks provides evidence of their access to these different types of capital. Cultural capital, for example, is an issue. Aspiring transnational trainees need a certain level of language competency both in Italian and in Chinese to search for information on the internet and from other resources available only in Italian or only in Chinese to obtain the necessary knowledge about the training and/or job market in China and Italy. Indeed, competency in Italian and

Chinese play a crucial role in the choices of these aspiring trainees. As mentioned, the interviewees who were interested in accessing training courses in China had only arrived in Italy in their teens; after being partially educated in China, they could only count on a few years of schooling in Italy and spent most of their family life in Italy in a Chinese speaking environment. As a result, they tend to be more proficient in Chinese than in Italian and do not feel comfortable enough with the Italian language in a highly formal training environment. The preference for Chinese-run shops for their "learning-by-doing" training in Italy, as much as for training courses in China over the ones in Italy, is certainly also dictated by the aspiring trainees' relative competence in the two languages. Moreover, the recourse to networks in China seems to stem as much from the constraints experienced by these migrants in their attempts to enter the labour market in Italy as by the opportunities arising in China in a specific historical contingency.

In any case, proficiency in Italian is one aspect of a larger riddle to solve, where a crucial difficulty for individual aspiring transnational trainees is to be able to decipher the labour market. A manicurist working in a beauty salon, for instance, explained:

*For many things, you need to start from the beginning. For example, like hair removal or something. Because we Chinese people, we went [back to China] to learn manicure. [...] But now [here in Italy] then people want [you] to learn hair removal because hair removal is the expertise of foreigners. We Chinese are not very good at that.*

This case shows that the mismatch between the market demands in Italy and the training courses in China, targeted at the Chinese job market, might affect the transferability of the acquired skills. Thus, some migrant workers are worried that the effort they put into going through transnational training could be useless in the Italian labour market.

In addition, a transnational training journey may require migrant workers to have a certain level of financial capital, although this is notably lower than that of institutional training in Italy. Our interviewees explained that to attend VETs in China, one has to pay for tuition fees and international travel as well as providing financial maintenance during the training period. Those aspiring to be transnational trainees, therefore, have to accumulate the required financial capital, as the cellphone repairer recalled:

*The cost [tuition fee] of a three-month course is like 7000 or 8000 yuan (900 or 1000 euro). If you go there, because it is in Guangzhou, so the living expenses are quite high. [...] At that time, I was with my friend, and then he asked me to go with him to learn. Well, he was also in that store where I was working. He said it was meaningless, and we'd better learn something.*

Because of the costs involved, many remain undecided about finding the money and going to China or staying in Italy and enduring poorly paid apprenticeships which last for a long time. Those who choose to take training courses in their hometown are clearly facilitated as their social networks there usually help them choose reliable training centres and, at the same time, host them so that they can save on part of the cost. For example, Di, a Chinese female manicurist trained in her hometown Qingtian recalled that:

*I didn't need to pay [for the training course]. Because my second aunt managed to get me in.[...] She stock goods through the training centre for her own nail salon, so she asked them to train someone for her salon. I just went there to take the course. For that training centre, it seems to work like that, if you stock a certain quantity of goods through them [...] they will train you to do manicure. My second aunt wanted to open a nail salon at that time. Then she went to the training centre to stock the goods and let their people teach me.*

In contrast to transnational trainees without local networks in the training cities, this interviewee demonstrates that, at the individual level, local and transnational networks are crucial in directing and supporting the choice to undergo training in China in a number of ways. Therefore, based on the diverse transnational journeys of our interviewees, we argue that the relative mix of the individual migrant workers' cultural, financial, and social capital shapes their ability to recognise and exploit transnational resources and opportunities and match them with the labour market in the country of residence.

Although, the skills acquired in the training institutions in China and the corresponding certificates might not be recognised by the relevant Italian institutions, nor by non-Chinese employers in Italy, interviews with Chinese migrants trained in China show that they usually plan to start an individual business after a few years of work for co-ethnic employers.

To sum up, although with relatively limited capital and subject to multiple constraints, our interviewees recognise the importance of transnational networking for upward occupational mobility, as much as transnational entrepreneurs do while trying to establish and/or expand their business. While moving transnationally and undergoing training, some explore opportunities for business, such as the skilled worker planning to help his brother enter the bubble tea business in Italy mentioned above, others cherish the dream of becoming self-employed, after working for a few years for co-ethnic employers. Thus, at least for some, the line separating transnational entrepreneurs and workers is blurred.

## 9. Concluding remarks

The title of our article, that evokes the work of E.P. Thompson on *The making of the English Working Class* (1963), points to the processes through which transnational migrant workers make themselves by exercising their agency as much as they are made by the constraints and opportunities for mobility and training in a transnational space, favoured by their transnational networking.

The paper takes into due account the workers' unequal embeddedness. It clarifies that for the would-be skilled workers, the process of skill acquisition can stem from comparative advantages - such as the possibility of mobilising transnational networks and resources - as much as from the lack of access to some other advantages more easily accessible to the natives in the receiving country. The young apprentices, in fact, face many hurdles, and start their working life with limited resources because they find themselves growing up in a context where, as the children of migrants arriving in Italy as teenagers, their access to formal training institutions was severely restricted. Moreover, they were never fully incorporated into the Italian mainstream labour market, and instead tend to be relegated to a highly informal labour market, mainly in the circle of businesses run by co-nationals. Thus, the apprentices' position is a complex one, underpinned by their somehow uneven embeddedness and also shaped by crucial constraints.

Unlike the scholars who tend to extol too quickly the virtues of simultaneous double embeddedness (see You and Zhou, 2019), we offer a more nuanced perspective. On the one hand, we stress the workers' agency as being the outcome of their uneven embeddedness, stemming from their particular experience in the given historical circumstances, which is more disenfranchising than empowering. On the other hand, we argue that these migrants' trajectories have a transformative logic. In fact, our ethnography points to a number of new skills acquired by the transnational workers, well beyond the technical skills acquired by attending VETs in China. These include learning how to expand transnational networks, mobilise money, time, and other personal resources, and also taking risks, including the risk of mismatch between the skills acquired in China and those required in the job market back in Italy.

Their mobility across different time and space impacts on and influences the trainees' perspectives. Even though some may fail in correctly and effectively reading the labour market they will enter, in any case, they go through a process of continuous adjustments and navigations facilitated by the transnational social networks they are able to mobilise, and this experience may help them to escape the logics of the job market which held them back, and, eventually, empower them. Some, for instance, develop new aspirations, for instance to become entrepreneurs. Crucially, the very process of skill acquisition can turn out to be the stepping

stone that instantiates and stimulates further migrant workers' mobility and resource mobilisation abilities. This, in turn, points to the importance of the mobility capital in reducing the artificial gap between the concepts of migration and mobility often conceived of dichotomously.

We argue that as far as the mobilisation of transnational resources to increase one's chances of upward socio-economic mobility is concerned, the scholarly distinction between transnational entrepreneurs and transnational workers should be regarded as artificial and the transnational mixed embeddedness approach, which until now was seen as only applying to transnational entrepreneurs, should be extended to include the transnational mixed embeddedness of migrant workers. Many of the hurdles and opportunities that the migrant workers find along the path to becoming skilled are similar to those experienced by transnational entrepreneurs, as well as the need for intensive networking and evaluation of institutional and market contexts in the transnational spaces where their action is deployed. Issues of mismatch in the skills required in different (national) markets, met by our interviewees, resonate with problems of inconsistent requirements and regulations often faced by other transnational actors, including entrepreneurs and highly skilled migrant workers operating in transnational spaces and markets.

Insofar as it dwells on the ways in which skills are identified, acquired, negotiated and defended in a transnational perspective and contexts, the paper is in dialogue with the scholars critically discussing the transnational circulation of knowledge and skill. It offers an ethnographic account of the under-researched and under-discussed topic of workers' transnational mobility to become skilled. We thus hope to contribute to a cross-fertilisation between the literature on migrant workers' transnational search for skills and that on transnational highly skilled professionals, as argued by Nijenhuis and colleagues (2021). By doing so, we expose, yet again, the limits of the approach taken by destination states' that devises different policies and sets out separate paths for different types of migrants from the very moment when they enter the country, thus freezing the fates of the mobile high-skilled in opposition to the immobile less skilled.

The transnational training of would-be skilled migrant workers is a new phenomenon that we observed as involving the sending and receiving countries. We did not detect expansion of networking and exploration of opportunity structures beyond these two countries. Future research could enquire on whether the multiple, newly acquired skills will enable these workers to expand their reach beyond these two national contexts.

Also, time has proved to be crucial in the workers' planning of their future, as the perspective to remain an underpaid apprentice for years was an important element propelling their desires

for less frustrating training. Future research, however, should delve deeper on the intersection of space and time - as suggested by a growing body of literature - and how this shapes the process of accumulating 'mobility capital'. Another future line of enquiry could be the transnational workers' subjective perception of their mobility and mobility capital, not only in relation to work, skills acquisition, and money considerations but also as linked to relationally embedded rationales, along the lines explored, for less recent phenomena, by Boese and colleagues (2021).

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