Citizenship Practices of Chinese Students on an Australian Campus: a Case Study

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Abstract
This paper explores the citizenship practices of a group of Chinese international students through their engagement with a language club at a university located in Melbourne, Australia. By considering the practices associated with their mutual engagement in this club, the paper scrutinises how these students creatively carve out space to practise citizenships in ways that are meaningful in their lives. The results show that the club was constructed by its members as an intermediary space for Chinese international students to maintain connection with their own ethnic community and to engage with students from different language and cultural backgrounds. Through their engagement with this club, they practise a form of citizenship which is a hybrid of neoliberal citizenship, Chinese citizenship, and global citizenship. These citizenship practices are illustrative of the efforts made by international students to create conditions for citizenship practice, and they show the students’ capacity to mobilise cultural capital for practising meaningful citizenship and experiencing belonging in the host society. These citizenship practices have implications for higher education institutions and host societies to construct favourable conditions for international students’ citizenship practices and belonging.

Keywords International student · Chinese · Citizenship practice · Belonging · Case study

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Introduction

The number of students studying outside their home countries has grown significantly over the past few decades (OECD 2021). Although the importance of this mobile group has been highlighted in policy discourses as representing great economic value for the host countries and as fostering important human capital for its home countries, the actual experiences of international students are often characterised by marginalisation, discrimination, exclusion, and disadvantage (Tran and Hoang 2020). As a result, students in this group project a dichotomous image as both ‘valuable’ and ‘vulnerable’ (Cho 2017). Their experiences are associated to a significant degree with their temporary migrant status which restricts their access to citizenship entitlements such as work rights and government benefits available to their peers (Sinanan and Gomes 2020; Tran and Hoang 2020). They also reflect the multiple difficulties international students face in building social connections in host societies, in achieving economic security, in remaining physically and mentally healthy, and in developing a sense of belonging. These factors contribute to their perceived image in the host society as either outsiders (Marginson 2012) or as vulnerable citizens who need intervention in their study and living circumstances (Sherry et al. 2010). As a result, their actual lived experience of navigating social engagement and creating meaningful lives in their host societies has been largely unexplored. This study contributes to research on international students’ mobility experiences by analysing the citizenship practices of a group of Chinese international students in a language club at a university in Melbourne, Australia. It explores different forms of practising citizenship among international students and how these hybrid practices enable the construction of a sense of belonging both in the club and in their host country.

Citizenship, belonging, and international students

Recent studies have moved beyond a deficit focus on international students as perennially disadvantaged to investigate the actual practices of their engagement with academic and social life. In this vein, research has demonstrated the strong agency shown by international students in understanding and navigating normative academic practices, including the disciplinary requirements of their courses (Arkoudis and Tran 2007; Matsumaga et al. 2021; Tran 2011), in adapting to new learning environments, and in forging their learning trajectories during their study overseas (Benzie 2015; Jiang and Edirisingha 2018). Scholars have also explored international students’ social life from a diverse range of perspectives. Some of them examined international students’ negotiation of social and ethnic identities in their engagement with new social environments, despite the social marginalisation they experience in host societies (Hsieh 2006; Oikonomidoy and Williams 2013). Others investigated how international students manage their social relationships through disconnecting from and reconnecting with diverse communities for social support and identity formation (Gomes 2017; Machart 2017; Soong 2015).
These studies render visible the wide range of activities in which international students engage in order to perform and forge meaningful citizenships in the face of restrictions associated with their non-citizen status in the host society. These activities have rarely been examined from a citizenship perspective, however. The studies that adopted this theoretical lens have tended to treat citizenship as a formal status associated with the nation-state, examining citizenship in terms of rights entitlements and traditional civic and political activities such as voting and engaging with local community (Skeiker 2010; Szelényi and Rhoads 2007; Tran and Hoang 2020). Although the status dimension of citizenship is useful in underlining the limited social and political rights of international students in their host societies which often contribute to their situation of being marginalised and excluded in these societies, it leaves out of the picture the citizenships expressed and practised in international students’ everyday lives. In order to gain a comprehensive view of the multiple citizenships Chinese international students practised through their engagement with the language club, this paper draws on the notion of inclusive citizenship (Lister 2007; Smith et al. 2005) which focuses on the ways young people are ‘constructively active’ in their communities, and recognises their existing, informal forms of everyday cultural, social and political participation as legitimate expression and enactment of citizenship.

By understanding citizenship as ‘constructive social participation’, inclusive citizenship offers a framework within which young people can ‘identify themselves as citizens, and value their activities as expressions of citizenship’ irrespective of their formal citizenship status (ibid., p. 441). For this study, it allows us to explore international students’ everyday citizenship practices through which their notions of citizenship are expressed and experienced. We understand practice in this paper as a nexus of doings and sayings embodied in ‘intentional and voluntary’ activities performed by people on a daily basis (Schatzki 2012, p. 5). Instead of seeing it as an outcome of the social order, we understand it as an creation in response to people’s understanding of the social order which recognises their capacity for adaption and change. As such, it goes beyond the dichotomy of agency and structure, and informs a sensitive consideration of people’s everyday activities (Fu 2017).

Being mobile in a world where citizenship rights are still largely defined by borders of nation-states means that international students are often in a vulnerable position, their rights entitlement and wellbeing not being sufficiently protected by reliable and coherent mechanisms (Tran and Hoang 2020). As scholars (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2017) arguing for rethinking the ways to protect international students’ rights contend, examining students’ social activities through the lens of citizenship allows us to appreciate the nature of the citizenship practices in which they engage, practices reflecting a wide range of economic, sociocultural, and political activities in the host society. Examining these practices as a performance of their understanding of citizenship can help us understand the kind of citizenship that is meaningful for them while providing insight into the ways in which the institutional and social contexts of citizenship can be improved.
This study adds to the literature about international students’ mobility experiences through examining the citizenship practices of a group of Chinese international students in a language club they run at a university in Melbourne, Australia. In what follows, I will first provide an account of the Chinese language club that is analysed in this paper. This is followed by findings about how this club has been constructed by a group of Chinese international students as a unique space for their social life in Melbourne, and how they practise multilayered citizenship through engaging with this space. I close this paper with a discussion of the implications of this case study for the study of international students and for higher education institutions in generating an inclusive and supportive climate for international students’ citizenship practices.

The case study

The case this paper focuses on is a language club run by a group of Chinese international students at a university campus in Melbourne. This case study is based on a data collection conducted in December 2021 as part of a research project investigating citizenship practices and belonging of Chinese international students in Melbourne, Australia. In the interviews I conducted with Chinese international students, this club was mentioned by quite a few participants when they were talking about their social life in Melbourne. Participants invested a significant amount of time and energy into running this club, and it was obvious that this club played a crucial role in their social lives and in their engagement with the host society. Their experiences spurred me to want to understand why students invested so much time and energy in this club. What does their engagement with this club mean to them? And what do these participatory activities tell us about the citizenship they practise in Melbourne?

To address these questions, we conducted a case study based on this language club in order to develop an in-depth understanding of its creation and operation and of the citizenship practices generated by the mutual engagement of its members. Case study as a research method allow researchers to examine a phenomenon through identifying and systematically investigating a ‘typical’ or ‘exemplary’ instance of it (O’Toole & Beckett, 2013, p. 51). This investigation is enabled by detailed and in-depth data collection from multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). According to the accounts of Chinese international students, this club is a major vehicle for their social engagement, an outlet for their social lives in which they spend a great deal of time engaging with their national peers and with international students from countries other than China. It represents an exemplary space in which international students are engaged in active citizenship practices and where a sense of belonging is experienced; hence, it makes an ideal case for understanding international students’ citizenship and belonging practices in Melbourne.

Before introducing the details of the case study, it is necessary to provide some background information about the club. Established in 2016 by a group of Chinese international students, its aims are outlined on its homepage on the university student union website. They include teaching spoken and written Chinese (Mandarin),
creating a social network between Chinese people and locals, providing opportunities for people to practise Mandarin with native speakers, and creating a Chinese learning environment that accepts everyone regardless of age, occupation, or cultural background. The key activities this club offers include free Mandarin lessons and various cultural activities and events, not restricted to students at the university. On the club’s social media page, the organisers cordially ask its members to bring their friends and enjoy learning Chinese together.

The operational team of this club includes one president, one secretary, one treasurer, and a team of committee members responsible for a wide range of tasks including recruiting new members, attending student club expos at the beginning of each academic year, recruiting and training language lecturers and tutors, performing administrative work associated with teaching, developing and delivering language classes, organising special events such as welcoming parties and Chinese cultural events, raising funds, maintaining the social media pages of the club, and publicising club services and activities.

The team was awarded the Club of the Year in 2017 among hundreds of student clubs and organisations at the university. Its membership exceeded one thousand students before the pandemic with over 300 members attending the language classes and cultural events organised by the club at least once in the second semester of 2019. After the shock of the pandemic in 2020, the club resumed its operation in 2021. It currently has over 100 active members who regularly attend online language classes and cultural activities.

Free Mandarin lessons is one of the key activities of this club. The club maintains a team of lecturers and tutors through recruiting and training new language teachers. The teaching team designs, administers, and delivers weekly classes at elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels to those members who joined to learn Mandarin. The classes run for 22 weeks, covering the first 11 weeks of the two long terms in each academic year. Each session includes a 45-min lecture followed by a 30-min tutorial in which students practise their new skills. The club has a fully functioning marketing team, maintaining home pages on major social media platforms through which they provide rich language learning materials and promote club activities.

The data in this case study was mainly collected through a focus group interview with five of the key members of the club. The interview was conducted via Zoom in December 2021 because indoor gatherings in Melbourne were restricted due to the pandemic and because two of the participants were resident in China. The participants included the former and current president of the club, a lecturer who has been voluntarily teaching mandarin lessons for the club over the past 2 years, the current secretary of the club, and the current treasurer who is in charge of the finance- and marketing-related work of the club. In the two-hour interview participants were asked to first provide a detailed introduction to the club covering its history since its establishment in 2016, its purpose, and how it has evolved over time. Informed by the notion of inclusive citizenship as everyday practice, they were then invited to share their stories of finding and working in the club, the role(s) they played/playing in the club, and discuss together the meaning they derive from their engagement with it.

1 A term in Australian universities normally comprises 12 weeks.
The interview data was transcribed verbatim in Chinese. Thematic analysis was conducted using the NVivo software. The concept of inclusive citizenship (Lister 2007; Smith et al. 2005) was employed to inform the analysis of participants’ engagement with the club. The interview data was supplemented by information collected from the club’s social media pages on Facebook, Instagram, and WeChat. This information, collected before the interview, was used as a knowledge base for the researchers to draw on for building rapport with the interviewees during the interview, and to assist them in better understanding the dialogue between the interviewees so that effective follow-up questions could be asked. It was also used to triangulate the data collected from the focus group interview. The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts generated two main themes about citizenship practices in the club: first, that the club is a unique space for citizenship practices, and second, that multiple citizenships are practised through students’ mutual engagement in the club. The following sections elaborate on these two themes.

The language club as an intermediary space

All the interviewees mentioned that they joined multiple clubs at the beginning of their first academic year in order to explore possibilities for their social lives but later dropped out of most of them; however, they found that their engagement with the language club deepened over time. They said that they invested a significant amount of time and effort in operating and expanding this club, developing a special attachment to it. When asked what was unique about this club for them, the interviewees all commented on how the language club was constructed and functioned as an intermediary platform.

The former president of this club explained that:

When international students come to the university campus, they are relatively unfamiliar and scared, and then they may need to attach to a group very quickly, but at the same time they do not want this attachment to be completely with Chinese people. Some people may think if I attach to a group of a hundred percent Chinese, what is the point of study abroad? Right? I think our club provides a very good intermediary platform: you can keep in touch with both Chinese and foreigners; you are safe on the one hand; and you are out of your comfort zone on the other. This feeling is a very subtle balance.

This subtle balance was echoed by other interviewees. One language instructor at the club said that:

It's not a purely Chinese club, and is not a purely English club either. I think it’s probably a club that is led by Chinese students, but embraces English culture or multiple cultures, because it maintains a great balance (between Chinese speakers and non-Chinese speakers).
Another interviewee related his experience:

I joined probably a dozen clubs at the beginning, but finally stayed in the Chinese Club because other clubs are either very Chinese, or a completely Chinese club. I also joined linguistics club, and creative writing - this kind of more English club, but honestly you do not feel a very strong sense of belonging there, as you always feel I could not follow, or we are not on the same page, so just participating for the sake of it, but the Chinese Club has a really good balance.

As is apparent from these comments, the club is purposefully constructed as a safe space for Chinese international students to engage with students from other cultural and language backgrounds. Gomes (2022) uses the term ‘gated community’ to describe the student society created by Singaporean students in Melbourne through markers of cultural familiarity, explaining how this community works as a home-away-from-home for its Singaporean members by encouraging their multicultural friendships. The language club, according to the account of interviewees, works in a similar way. It was purposefully carved out for Chinese international students who aspire to have intercultural experiences but are not confident enough to face the potential challenges they may encounter gaining this experience. The presence of other Chinese students in this club provides a reliable source of support for their engagement with people from other cultural and language backgrounds in an overseas environment. Their competence in Chinese language and culture also adds to their confidence in encountering different cultures, helping to ease the anxiety and stress that may arise during this process while also fostering a sense of belonging.

Moreover, while it is a student club that aims to provide a space for people who want to learn and practice Mandarin, it also expects members to be interested in learning Chinese language and culture, or at least to have an open mind about knowing more about them. This shared interest in Chinese language and culture among its members cuts across its members’ racial, ethnic, national, cultural, and language differences, serving as a gateway to the language club through which a safe and inclusive community for intercultural engagement can be built. Chinese language and culture as the fundamental attributes of mutual recognition among the members of this club are more flexible and less exclusive boundaries than the usual ones of territory and ethnicity (Castells 1997), allowing a safe and inclusive space for the club members to be constructively active citizens (Smith et al. 2005). I will elaborate on the various citizenship expressions and practices enabled by this community in the next section.

**Practice of citizenships**

All the participants were deeply involved in the work of the language club. This was illustrated by the significant amount of work entailed for them in running the weekly Mandarin classes, organising special events, updating the social media pages of the club, developing language learning materials used in classes and shared on the club’s social media page on a regular basis, marketing the club’s services and
activities on campus and via social media to potential members, and getting sponsorships from local businesses. In performing these tasks in collaboration with others, they practise a multilayered citizenship which helps them build meaning into their new, mobile lives in Melbourne, and to experience a strong sense of belonging.

Neoliberal citizenship

Acquiring economic and cultural capital is often seen as one of the dominant purposes of international education. International students are often seen through this lens as individualistic and competitive subjects (Reddy 2019). A similar view can also be found in the discourse around global citizenship education which is often linked with the globalisation of education, highlighting ‘a market-oriented skill set’ that can improve young people’s competitiveness in the labour market (Myers 2016). This discourse about international education plays a significant role in shaping Chinese international students’ neoliberal-style subjectivity characterised by a strong awareness of building an enterprising and striving selfhood in order to secure a competitive edge in global or national job markets (Martin 2022). This subjectivity is well illustrated by the recruitment message of the language club in its effort to attract new members, as well as by its members’ purposes in joining it and by their reflections on the benefits of their engagement with it.

In the introductory video on the homepage of the language club website, aside from stating the aim of the club as creating a safe and inclusive space for all for learning Mandarin and knowing more about Chinese culture, Chinese international students are explicitly addressed by the video positioning the club as a site for those who are interested in establishing a career in education and training to develop their teaching skills, and for those who are interested in a career in public communication and marketing to develop their skills by publicising the language club through online and offline channels, organising special cultural events, and gaining sponsorship from local businesses.

The attractiveness of these promises is corroborated by the accounts of the interviewees when discussing their motivation for joining this club. One interviewee majoring in psychology commented that:

Unlike others who feels the mission of communicating Chinese culture, I was very utilitarian. Because I want to do education-related job in the future, and I saw this club provides free teaching training, so I joined…. I wasn’t full of enthusiasm when I went there. I didn’t even think about how I was going to spread culture at all; I just thought, ok, this thing is relevant to my career, so I’ll give it a go.

Another member commented that:

This is a good environment, a precious learning opportunity. You can practise your teaching ability, develop your interpersonal skills. These days if you go to an outside institution and get some training in your teaching and presentation skills, you have to pay for it, right? Our team can provide the same for free; moreover, it is a peer-to-peer relationship, not a hierarchical one. Getting con-
structive feedback in a supportive environment, you would not be criticised or feel painful; it can only help you to do it better next time.

The club kept its membership-attracting promise of being a site for developing professional skills. This was demonstrated by one participant’s experience of running the marketing department of the club. Majoring in media and communication, she joined the language club at the end of 2020, engaging in marketing work soon after. To enlarge the club’s media presence she first converted all the classes delivered by the club in 2020 into articles, publishing them on the club’s WeChat public account. In 2021, she recruited a few more members for the marketing department and publicised the club’s welcome party via WeChat, Facebook, Instagram, and email. She also established connections with other student organisations and clubs at the university so that information about events and activities could be published on each other’s social media pages. Later, she worked with the education department of the club to publish weekly reviews of Mandarin classes on its social media pages. They included a graphic designed to reflect the theme of that week’s classes and a text summary (about 800–900 words in English) that recapped the content of the elementary, intermediate, and advanced level classes in that week. To further promote the club and increase its presence on social media, she also developed with other members a series of Chinese character and idiom posters, regularly uploading them onto the club’s social media pages.

The work of the marketing team led by her achieved significant success. By the end of 2021, the number of followers on the club’s Facebook page had increased to 1650, while the number of followers of the club’s WeChat official account reached 750. The team also established extensive sponsorship connections with the local business community (over 20 cafés, restaurants, shops, and tutoring and training services) and cultural institutions (such as the Museum of Chinese Australian History).

When reflecting on her work, she commented that:

…all the work I have done at language club has developed my work abilities in different aspects, made me more confident. It also makes me more willing to join just a bigger platform and a bigger team, or a more professional place to meet new people and then work on different projects.

She also reflected on her personal growth:

…I was not very confident in taking on the marketing work for the club at the beginning, but others encouraged me, and now after all this work, I feel more confident to take on bigger challenges. I am now the partnerships director of the Australia-China Youth Association and working for the 14th Australia-China Emerging Leaders’ Summit. I feel I am qualified for this role because of my experience with language club. It is a growing process.

The shared enterprise of the language club members in constructing and using the club as a supportive and accessible community for professional development illustrates their identification with the value of planning and building competitive and confident selves for their future careers. It indicates their consciousness of being ‘rational economic actors’ (Lynch et al. 2007) or performing their entrepreneurial
selves (Kelly 2006). The fact that many of the participants joined the club for the purpose of developing practical professional skills and preparing for their future careers demonstrates the power of the context of neoliberal governance discussed by Harris et al. (2021) and Kelly (2006) in shaping responsible individuals who constantly consider education from the perspective of their engagement in the labour market, and actively seeking opportunities to perform entrepreneurial selves. If studying overseas is a collective project of international students and their families to help them secure an edge in the labour market after their graduation, exploring and leveraging possible opportunities afforded by this collective project to work on their projects of self becomes a responsibility for these students. A form of neoliberal citizenship is thus practised in their efforts to achieve an enterprising and striving selfhood.

**Chinese citizenship**

The work involved in constructing the language club into an intermediary space for Chinese international students to engage with people from the same or different language and cultural backgrounds provides rich opportunities for Chinese international students to perform and consolidate their Chinese identity. This identity performance is first actualised through teaching Mandarin as a second language. One participant said that:

(By providing Chinese language courses and an environment for non-Chinese speakers to practise Chinese), I feel that it is a great way for Chinese students to meet each other and to stimulate their own identity about China.

Another participant spoke of how the language club provided an opening for her social life:

I think the club is more like an outlet for my social life, partly to develop some personal skills, the ability to work and communicate with people, and partly to me it’s a social outlet for college. Yes, you will meet all kinds of different people in the club, and then you will be able to find friends among your colleagues, work with them, hang out with them, create more common memories to help you maintain a good relationship.

Identity entails experiences of both similarity and difference (Buckingham 2008). In terms of similarity, language is a primary source of commonality and comfort through which a sense of connectedness can be experienced (Gomes 2022). Teaching Chinese in collaboration with other Chinese students to non-Chinese-speaking members of the club provides the best opportunity for Chinese international students to experience this connection to the broader collective of Chinese culture and to establish a strong social network with their peers from a similar cultural background. Research has shown that such networks play a crucial role in providing practical and emotional support to international students (Glass et al. 2013; Gomes 2022).

In the meantime, teaching Chinese as a second language affords the opportunity for cross-cultural encounters through which the differences in their cultural identity
can be experienced. These differences frame their connection with Chinese language and culture as something these Chinese international students ‘uniquely possess’ (Buckingham 2008, p. 1). They also ignite a consciousness that performing their Chinese identity makes them a cultural ambassador. One participant who joined the club out of a motivation to prepare for her future teaching career shared her view about being a cultural communicator:

I didn’t think about how to spread culture at all; I just thought, OK, this thing has something to do with my career, so I’ll try it. But I became the teaching coordinator of the club afterwards, and after that I started to think about the communication of Chinese culture more seriously.

Participants also expressed their identification with the purpose of the language club. One participant spoke of her reason for joining the club:

I decided to join language club because I felt there is a lot of positive energy in this club. You can work with other Chinese students to communicate Chinese language and culture. It is something I am very passionate about.

Similarly, another participant remarked that:

The reason I joined language club was I feel it is a club doing real work for communicating Chinese culture. It will create a place for international students to socialise. Although it is small, it is doing a meaningful thing.

Their Chinese citizenship was also apparent in their intention to communicate what they saw authentic Chinese culture through providing opportunities for their students to interact with real Chinese people, and their seeing this task as a natural mission for them. One participant explained this:

For me, I’m using language learning as an excuse to communicate culture. I invite people to come to learn the language, but I’m actually showing them, OK, what our Chinese people are really like now. I want students to have the opportunity to meet real Chinese people, because there are lots of politicised images about Chinese on media, but seeing is better than hearing. For our students, they can meet and talk to real Chinese people, they will see for themselves, okay, the Chinese I know is not the same as I see on the media. I think this is a meaningful thing to do.

Another participant who had taught Chinese traditional dancing, Chinese painting, and calligraphy at several cultural events in Melbourne concurred:

For me, I have an inexplicable sense of mission in terms of teaching Chinese to foreigners. I feel like it is a meaningful and also handy thing to do while you study abroad.

Living in Australia as mobile residents, international students’ own cultural identities are no longer effortless givens due to the separation of their spatial belonging from their identity belonging (Inglis and Thorpe 2012). Those cultural identities need to be sustained through intentional experiences of connection to similar
language and cultural groups. Participants’ engagement with the language club is an ideal opportunity for them to experience their Chinese identity as different from the identity of their language students while receiving support and recognition from peers who share their cultural background. In addition to this, by working together for the shared enterprise of communicating (authentic) Chinese culture, they also establish a strong supportive network and create shared memories through which their Chinese identity is sustained in a different social and cultural context.

Global citizenship

Along with their practice of neoliberal citizenship and Chinese citizenship in the language club, their engagement with the club also represents an expression and practice of global citizenship. This is indicated in their strong awareness of gaining intercultural experiences and in their active effort to obtain these experiences. In expressing her disappointment at being trapped in China during the pandemic, one participant commented that:

In these two years, because of the pandemic, many people can only stay in China and study online. There is not much opportunity to meet foreign students, so what kind of studying abroad is this?

Students’ strong awareness of gaining intercultural experience through studying abroad reflects the global consciousness approach of global citizenship education which aims to foster students’ cultural sensitivity and their global orientation (Dill 2013). It also resonates with Andreotti’s (2010) notion of soft global citizenship education which emphasises an understanding and tolerance of different cultures. It is obvious from the comment above that receiving this form of global citizenship education was assumed by them to be an integral part of their overseas education, almost an entitlement of international students. As their life in Melbourne unfolds; however, they realise that active participation is required in order to claim value from this citizenship. One participant talked about her realisation that obtaining cross-cultural experience entails active effort rather than being a natural feature of educational mobility:

I used to think that when I went to university and Melbourne was such a diverse city, I would make friends with people from all kinds of countries, but that’s not true; there are too many Chinese students. If you don’t work really hard and have a good opportunity and platform, you’re naturally attracted to people around you with the same traits… this is not what I thought university life would be like. It wasn’t until I came across language club later in the year this was a bit better, so it just became a daily habit.

Citizenship is an active concept which entails an ethics of participation (Faulks 2000). The effort of this student to gain cross-cultural experience through engaging with people from different language and cultural backgrounds at the language club is her way of deriving value from her global citizenship. In the meantime, by providing free language classes and cultural events, these international students also practice
their global citizenship by contributing to the cultural diversity of the host society while providing an accessible opportunity for others to learn about a different language and culture. A participant of the focus group interview commented that:

We just want those who are not native Chinese speakers to have a better understanding of Chinese culture. Then we, as Chinese, who know more about Chinese culture, can also meet more people through such a platform.

All the participants of the focus group agreed that ‘it is a meaningful thing to help foreigners to understand Chinese culture’. They were also proud of this way of participation as global citizens. The former president of this club shared his views in the focus group interview:

During my own term as the president of the club and my teaching, I have become good friends with many students, and I find it a great reward to help them learn Chinese and then to help them understand Chinese culture.

Chinese international students’ expression and practice of global citizenship through voluntary language teaching establishes their unique give and take relationship with the host society through which the meaning of global citizenship is experienced. This practice embodies the reciprocal nature of citizenship which underlies the inseparable bond between an individual’s rights and their obligations to others (Faulks 2000). The practice of global citizenship also allows Chinese international students to experience a sense of belonging to the university and the broader host society. This feeling is well illustrated in the comment offered by a participant who continued teaching Mandarin online during the pandemic while she was in China:

This club made me feel like I belonged to the University, and I belonged to Australia, and it was a two-way feedback. It’s about what I give to the city, what I give to my peers, because our students are not only from our university. There were actually some people from outside the university who came to the classes, including the Turkish students that Cathy (another participant of the focus group interview) just mentioned, and a very experienced teacher who can speak German, English, and French. This makes me feel as if I am still in touch with the world, even though I am in China; or I am in Melbourne, but I am not completely confined to the circle of international students, I am not only an international student. I might also be a teacher; I might also be a communicator.

The significance of the language club as a space creatively carved out for global citizenship practice also applies to students from other countries. Participants talked about the significance of the club as a place for people from different language and cultural backgrounds to gain intercultural experience and make friends:

This safe environment (referring to the club) also applies to our students. We encourage our students to communicate in Chinese. Even if they don’t know how to say the word, we can teach them so they can get used to speaking Chinese and then make friends along the way. I feel this is also a significant growth for our students.
This is illustrated in an example given by a participant:

We have a tutor this semester. He is Indonesian … His grandfather is Chinese, so he can speak some Chinese. We interviewed him and thought he can teach beginners’ level with no problem, and he turned out to be a great tutor. I think for him this is also a big effort to step out of his comfort circle. As a foreigner, he has found a circle where he can contact Chinese people, but not completely separate from his own circle of Indonesian people. I think it is actually a very delicate comfort zone for foreigners and for us.

Being an inclusive environment, the club works as a platform for people from different countries or cultural backgrounds to experience cross-cultural interaction, foster cultural competence, and make friends. This shared enterprise and the opportunity for social connection shapes a ‘new cosmopolitan order by transcending symbolic and social boundaries’ (Glick Schiller et al. 2011, p. 407). Based on this order, the language club enabled a sense of belonging in a broad community of cultural others and common humanity through which its members’ identity as global citizens could be established (UNESCO 2015). This effect was particularly evident during the pandemic when students’ opportunities for social interaction were constrained by COVID-related restrictions. One participant commented that:

We have been teaching online this year (2021). Some of the students they’re in Sydney. They’ve also been confined to their house all the time, … they really like to come over to practise speaking and to find someone to talk to, and again it’s just as much a learning experience. Then we worked with some other organisations … some of their students were in the US and they came and stayed in our classes as well … we all come to learn Chinese and to make friends at the same time, so that’s the feeling. Here we can really see a version of cosmopolitanism being actualised in real life.

Beyond the give and take relationship through which their global citizenship is enacted and experienced, their practice of global citizenship also has a critical dimension which involves reflection and engagement with issues of conflict, power, and opposing views among cultures. This is illustrated in their efforts to create an engaging and relaxed environment for their students at the language club so that they can understand Chinese culture and current Chinese society through interacting with ‘real Chinese people’. One participant commented that:

We do not want our class to be overly intensive, because we are not a serious cram school which guarantees to boost your Chinese level in a short period of time. We focus more on people’s interest (in Chinese language and culture), that is, you enjoy learning Chinese, you enjoy being with real Chinese people, not that kind of stereotypical Chinese people, you stay with real Chinese people, you enjoy the process of learning Chinese, and then feel and enjoy our culture. I think this is more important.

The former president of the club seconded this opinion about communicating culture in an engaging way:
…our class topics are very diverse, from food, drink, and entertainment to maybe love and marriage. We like to talk about all sorts of topics, and we always incorporate in these topics what it’s like nowadays. This way they can discuss what kind of misunderstandings you have about China in the tutorial, and then we work together with the tutor to unravel the misunderstandings, so I think that we were also doing this (communicating culture) at the time.

As shown in these comments, members of the club aim to construct it as an engaging space for their students to learn Chinese and experience Chinese culture. In doing so, they engage them in in-person interaction and discussion, potentially enriching their understanding of China and Chinese culture. By carving out this space for people from different countries and cultural backgrounds to experience Chinese culture and discuss China-related issues, they contribute to the resources and opportunities for them to learn about Chinese language and culture. In the meantime, their efforts at communicating Chinese culture through offering real-life experience with Chinese people can counter non-Chinese members’ often homogenised image of China and Chinese international students depicted by the media in the host society. By performing their cultural identity on a platform that they have constructed in their host society, they practise a critical global citizenship through acquiring an autonomy that comes from the recognition and representation of their cultural identity which can potentially challenge existing narratives and discourses in the host society about a specific culture (Guerrero Farías 2021).

In sum, the mutual engagement between members of the language club enables a comprehensive learning experience of global citizenship covering both the soft content and critical dimensions of global citizenship education (Andreotti 2010). Membership of the language club community based on a shared interest in Chinese language and culture provides the common ground on which intercultural engagement can occur. This resonates with Metro-Roland’s (2018) study which demonstrates the value of communities created around shared markers beyond national identity in fostering international students’ sense of belonging and enhancing their engagement with the university community. Their engagement with the language club also aligns with the typical ways outlined by Keating (2016) in which a ‘global citizen’ attitude can be learned, such as encountering cultural others, learning a foreign language, and being involved in discussions about international issues.

Concluding remarks

The citizenship status of international students as temporary migrants often engenders a disadvantaged and vulnerable framing of this group, a framing which, to a large extent, casts a shadow over their active efforts to manage the challenges in their mobile lives and to forge a meaningful citizenship through their everyday engagement with host societies. This case study sheds light on this less-explored area in the literature through describing the citizenships practised in Chinese international students’ engagement with a language club at a metropolitan university in Australia. Their creative efforts in carving out and maintaining a safe and supportive
space for members to encounter cultural others demonstrates the capacity of international students to create conditions for their citizenship learning, identity performance, and social engagement in the host society. These practices resonate with the framework of ethical internationalisation practices proposed by Deuel (2022) in which international students are conceptualised as agents actively constructing their own identity through navigating their relationships with power and subjugating techniques. The citizenship practices this paper documents also contribute to the literature about international students’ informal citizenship practices which has been largely overshadowed by a focus on their citizenship status in the host society as temporary residents. It provides important insights, updating understandings of their formal citizenship in host societies.

It is worth noting that many of the citizenship practices in this language club which significantly contributed to students’ multiple citizenship identities and sense of belonging were motivated by a determination to building an enterprising and striving selfhood and secure a competitive edge for their future careers. This practice of neoliberal citizenship illustrates their subscription to and conscious embracing of the entrepreneurial self (Kelly 2006). As is shown in this study and the study of Cook and Romei (2020), however, young people’s performance of the entrepreneurial self often intersects with experiences of other identities associated with their affective relationships with place and different cultural communities. It is through this interlaced identity work that Chinese international students’ strong sense of belonging to the language club, the university, and the broader Melbourne society is engendered and experienced. The identity work and citizenship practices of Chinese international students described in this paper underline the multilayered and multifaceted nature of citizenship (Delanty 2000; Heater 2004) and the necessity of acknowledging diverse citizenship experiences through which our ‘plural and parallel’ allegiances, rights, responsibilities, and belonging to community, nation, and culture intersect and are experienced (Selby 1994). This is particularly meaningful for understanding that the citizenship and identity of international students as negotiating diverse identities in relation to socially and culturally organised groups constitutes a significant part of their lives (Pashby 2018). The give and take relationship between Chinese international students and their university community via the language club highlights the inseparable relationship between citizenship rights and responsibilities and the importance of everyday practice in enacting and shaping citizenship (Lawy and Biesta 2006) and in experiencing it as meaningful.

The characteristics of the language club as an intermediate space for cross-cultural engagement shed light on how Australian universities and society can create favourable conditions for international students to study, live, and belong. One of the key factors that has made the language club a space for active citizenship practice is that it acknowledges the cultural identity of Chinese international students. The club offers a platform for them to perform their unique identity. On this platform, their cultural identity works as a strength and resource rather than a barrier to their citizenship relationship with the host society. It helps them to establish a give and take relationship with the host society on a basis of equality, leading to meaningful citizenship and belonging experiences. A similar effect was observed in a study by Metro-Roland (2018) in which the author found that communities that
allow international students to exercise their complex and fluid identity can help foster belonging because they provide an inclusive environment which celebrates multiple identities. Through embracing cultural biography and storytelling, these communities can serve as a starting point for meaningful connection and dialogue, facilitate international students’ learning about global citizenship, and foster a sense of belonging in their host society (Caruana 2014; Goren and Yemini 2017; Metro-Roland 2018). It illustrates the power of an inclusive and equitable community built upon shared values and interests to cut across existing social divisions and to foster experiences of cultural understanding, enabling a sense of belonging to a global citizenship based on the ‘interconnected and reciprocally interpenetrating principles’ of conceiving differences (Beck, 2006, p. 72). As argued by Martin (2022), it is a civic responsibility of governments and universities to promote proactively a ‘truly cosmopolitan vision of urban life’ in which cross-group connections can thrive and a stronger sense of belonging can be fostered (p. 127). In doing so, higher education institutions and host societies of international students can help to not only construct a better study and living environment for international students but also foster a truly internationalised education and a multicultural society that benefits local students and residents.

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