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# **“Hot and bitter tears” (辛酸泪): An inquiry into Chinese migrants’ experiences of undocumented status**

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## **Abstract**

Undocumented Chinese migration to the UK has, in the aftermath of widely publicised events such as the Dover and Morecambe Bay tragedies, triggered significant concern. Since such events, attention has turned to other forms of irregular entry. Yet, undocumented Chinese migrants have remained in the UK and represent an under-researched group. Previous studies have predominantly focused on irregular Chinese migrants' motivations, their clandestine migration journeys, and experiences of exploitation in work. Less is known about the everyday lives and emotional dimensions of irregular Chinese migrants' experiences over time. In the light of this gap in the literature, the overarching aim of this thesis was to examine Chinese migrants' experiences of an undocumented status in the UK. To fulfil this aim, I constructed three research questions: how did Chinese migrants experience: i) the shift to an undocumented status?; ii) everyday life with an undocumented status?; and iii) the status journey over time? This qualitative study draws on narrative interviews, underpinned by ethnographic sensitivities and sensibilities, with undocumented Chinese migrants. Participants were recruited from two primary sites: a Chinese community centre and a Chinese Christian church. I adopted a narrative approach to analysis and attended to the content, function, structure, and context of migrant's narratives. Based on this analysis, I advance my argument that undocumented Chinese migrants experienced a form of extended liminality, which I have categorised into three domains: liminal law and status; liminal social and economic places; and liminal time. The experience of extended liminality intersected with gender and other biographical and structural elements in participants' narratives to create specific vulnerabilities. Through my interpretation of participants' narratives, I argue that Chinese

migrants' experiences of open-ended liminality were deeply connected with the 'hot and bitter tears' that characterised their narratives.

*Keywords:* undocumented migration, Chinese, UK, liminality, narrative analysis

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## Glossary of Chinese terms

dazu de gongzuo	odd jobs, handy work, unskilled work	打杂的工作
guanxi	relation, relationship, connection	关系
hukou	household registration	户口
laoxiang	fellow townsman/ villager, someone from the same hometown	老乡
liudong renkou	floating population, Chinese internal migrants without local household registration status	流动人口
mainzi	face (as in ‘losing face’), reputation	面子
Putonghua	common speech of the Chinese language, also known as Mandarin	普通话
qiaoxiang	overseas Chinese home area, migrant-sending region	侨乡
renshe	human snake, smuggled migrant	人蛇
shetou	snakehead, human smuggler or migration broker	蛇头
toudu	‘illegal’ immigration, to smuggle across a border ‘illegally’	偷渡

xiao

filial piety

孝

zhuanqian

to earn money

赚钱

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my daughter, Lucy, who is pure joy, and to my husband, Tim, who has patiently listened to every struggle and achievement along the way. Both of whom remind me, daily, what is important in life.

## Preface

*From 2010- 2012, I worked and volunteered at a Chinese community centre in Greater Manchester, UK, as an English Tutor and Family Project Worker.*

### **“The work is overloaded” (那个工作是超负荷的)**

As I lay my teaching materials on the desk, I picked up fragments of a heated conversation between Chen (陳), a Chinese man in his early twenties, and Wu (吳), in his fifties. Both worked in Chinese restaurants in the nearby Chinatown. Like many other Chinese men who visited the centre, Chen and Wu attended English classes on Monday mornings – their only day off each week, when the restaurant where they worked was closed. Pieces of A4 paper taped to the window at the front door advertised the classes available in both English and Chinese characters: English for Citizenship (積極公民英語班); Women’s English Conversation Club (婦女會話英語俱樂部); English for Daily Life and Work (日常生活及工作英語班): and Life in the UK (英國生活班).

Sitting at the desk, Wu’s right arm pointed repeatedly and with force toward the East of the building - the location of Manchester’s Chinatown, three streets away. Wu complained about the boss. The overtime he was forced to work. The low pay. He muttered about other kitchen workers who earned more money than he did. Chen joined in with Wu’s complaint, but he was hesitant. Scanning the room with his eyes, he lowered his voice and drew the conversation to a close. I had heard similar exchanges before. At the beginning and end of English classes, learners

often exchanged stories about their working conditions, the character of their boss, the details of their pay. Wu grew quiet. Rubbing his eyes, he looked out of the window. Having worked until the early hours of the previous night, he struggled to concentrate. As I drew the session to an end, Wu quickly left the building.

**“They’re not really asylum seekers, you know”**

I looked up from the coffee I had hastily made during a break from the English class I was teaching. A colleague at the Chinese community centre was standing in front of me.

They’re not really asylum seekers, you know.

Really?

No, they came here to earn money.

She was talking about the Sunshine Project. The name gave little away. It felt positive, hopeful, but ambiguous. I learned that the Sunshine Project was a language and learning group, made up of Chinese asylum seekers (mostly women). Despite having applied for asylum some years ago, most members of the Sunshine Project had remained subject to a temporary legal status for up to and over a decade.

**First encounters with undocumented statuses**

These short fragments are based on my early encounters with a range of irregular statuses to which the Chinese migrants with whom I worked were subjected. I learned that the lives of many Chinese migrants were dominated by their work. The stories I heard about conditions in the

kitchens of Chinese restaurants in Greater Manchester were layered with emotion: some tellers were visibly agitated, they protested loudly, and lay the injustices they had experienced on the desks where we were gathered to study English. They were also cautious, measured, aware of who was listening and careful about the stories they exchanged.

At the time that I first encountered such stories (2010-2012), the UK government made cuts to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision and ceased to fund training for individuals who were not in receipt of benefits. Chinese migrants with an irregular status were, therefore, no longer eligible for funded language training. Some years later, the ‘hostile environment’ policies increasingly brought civil actors into immigration enforcement roles (primarily enacted through the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts). In the context of increasingly negative policy and media discourses about ‘illegal’ immigration, I understood that there were hidden stories that had not yet been told. Stories about surviving without legal status or mainstream support systems. Stories about not fitting into acceptable categories of ‘deserving’ migrants. Stories about informal practices that were accepted within certain places. Stories that were embedded in place – in the Chinese community centre, in Chinese restaurants, and on the streets of Chinatown in Manchester. Stories of ‘hot and bitter tears’ (辛酸泪).

### **Hot and bitter tears (辛酸泪)**

“Hot and bitter tears” is a quote taken from an interview with one of the participants of this study: Wang, a Chinese man who had lived in the UK subject to a temporary status for five years before he acquired British citizenship. He claimed that all Chinese who came to the UK with an irregular status had a sad story to tell, filled with ‘hot and bitter tears’. The first character -辛 - can mean ‘hot’ (in flavour, taste) or ‘pungent’ and is also used to mean ‘suffering’, ‘hard’,

‘toilsome’ and ‘laborious’. The participants in this study all told stories of hardship and loss, shifts in identity, legal and social constraints, longing and waiting: stories of ‘hot and bitter tears’. The evocation of taste in the characters for ‘hot’ and ‘bitter’ aligned with the predominance of Chinese restaurants and takeaways as the backdrop for many of the narratives created during this study. The emotive nature of the phrase is also aligned with the nature of the narratives in this study: undocumented Chinese migrants’ stories were laden with figurative expressions of emotion. The ‘hot and bitter tears’ of participants’ stories act as threads that connect the chapters of this thesis.

# **Chapter 1 Introduction to the study**

## **1.2 Introduction**

In this chapter, I first outline the focus and theoretical orientation of the thesis, followed by an account of my personal and professional motivation for studying, specifically, undocumented Chinese migration. Then, I discuss the importance of the topic, before describing the overarching research aim and three research questions that underpinned this doctoral study. Next, I outline how the project evolved in response to the data collection phase of the study. The key terms used in this thesis, including ‘undocumented’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries, are described, alongside an account of the terms I have intentionally avoided. To provide context for the chapters that follow, I outline a brief history of Chinese migration to the UK and the UK policy context for undocumented migrants. Finally, I describe the structure of the thesis and the content of each of the eight chapters.

### **1.2.1 Focus and theoretical orientation of the thesis**

This thesis is a narrative inquiry into the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK, drawn from an analysis of the stories of Chinese migrants. Undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK, like those from other national groups subjected to an irregular status, face a number of structural difficulties. They are: excluded from many mainstream health and welfare services; unable to work legally and forced into informal and precarious employment; excluded from higher education; unable to drive legally, open a bank account or rent accommodation; and immobilised by an irregular status which makes it difficult to travel around or to leave the UK. These structural constraints, in turn, lead to emotional difficulties as migrants are often forced to

deal with exploitative informal employment arrangements, the fear of immigration raids, detention and deportation, and the impact on their family lives, their social worlds and their emotional health.

Given these difficulties and the subsequent effect on migrants' lives, the overarching aim of this thesis was to explore the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. To fulfil this aim, I constructed three research questions: how did Chinese migrants experience:

- i) the shift to an undocumented status?;
- ii) everyday life with an undocumented status?; and
- iii) the status journey over time?

These three research questions are explored in this thesis, each in turn, in chapters four, five and six in which participants' stories are presented alongside my analysis of their narratives.

The methodological orientation of this thesis is grounded in John Dewey's (1997) pragmatic philosophy of experience, in which experience was characterised by two criteria: interaction and continuity. Clandinin and Connelly (2000), both higher education scholars, developed from Dewey's two criteria of experience a three-dimensional model of narrative inquiry which included; i) sociality; ii) temporality; and iii) place. Their three-dimensional model, what Clandinin and Connelly termed the 'commonplaces' of narrative inquiry, guided the methodological approach to the study of Chinese migrants' experience in this thesis.

A key concept deployed in the interpretation of the participant narratives created during this study was *liminality*. Originally developed in the anthropological literature, liminality has been used by migration scholars to describe the experiences and the legal and social conditions of irregular and temporary migrants (see, for example, Chavez, 1991 on territorial liminality; and

Menji'var, 2006 on liminal legality). According to the anthropologists who developed the concept (first van Gennep, 1909, and later Turner, 1969), liminality occurred during rites of passage in the life course when individuals transitioned from one state to another. The liminal phase represented a break from social structure and, according to Turner, had certain characteristics which meant that those passing through (the 'liminal personae' or 'threshold people') were: silent, as opposed to outspoken; they accepted pain and suffering, rather than protesting; and they were heteronomous rather than autonomous (1969, p.95). I use these descriptors to outline the characteristics of the liminality that Chinese migrants experienced. However, unlike van Gennep and Turner's construction of liminality as a bounded phase with an endpoint, I argue that undocumented Chinese migrants experienced a form of open-ended liminality. This extended liminality shaped the inner lives of migrants and led to emotional suffering which, in the words of one participant, created the 'hot and bitter tears' that characterised participants' stories.

### **1.2.2 Motivation for studying undocumented Chinese migration**

My professional motivation for researching the experiences of undocumented Chinese migration is grounded in my experience as both a social worker in the statutory sector and a project worker in a Chinese community organisation. In the latter role, I worked with Chinese migrants who were subjected to a variety of legal statuses, and I began to understand the way in which an irregular legal status shaped daily life. Then, during both my postgraduate social work training and employment in statutory social work, I noticed that opportunities to develop knowledge about the evolution of immigration law and policy and the experiences of people subjected to immigration controls were limited. This practice gap, between the diversity of

people and legal statuses in society, and the knowledge prioritised in social work education and statutory practice, began to form in my mind. Therefore, a key motivation that underpinned this study was a drive to present material that may help social work audiences to develop understanding of the needs and circumstances of undocumented Chinese migrants which, in turn, may contribute to improved professional practice.

My interest in Chinese language and culture originated in several years spent studying Putonghua (普通话, the standard language in mainland China) and learning about Chinese culture at Xi'an Jiaotong (西安交通), Fudan (复旦), Manchester and Keele Universities. As an outsider to the experience of undocumented migration, I have used my intermediate grasp of Putonghua to engage with migrants' experiences in their own terms. Although the challenges involved in multilingual research have been well documented (refer to chapter eight for a detailed discussion), this mode of research can also be "epistemologically productive" (Holmes, Fay, Andrews & Attia, 2013, p.291). As a Chinese language learner, I could develop a position of defamiliarization and curiosity about the way in which meaning was expressed and built throughout participants' narratives. Additionally, the difficulties involved in translating figurative concepts from Chinese into English pushed me to consider meaning in depth and stretched my theoretical imagination. My outsider status and my engagement with a linguistic group to which I am external, yet my attempt to explore the inner worlds and experiences of participants, is a constant tension throughout this thesis.

### **1.2.3 Undocumented Chinese migration**

Undocumented Chinese migration to the UK triggered significant concern in the aftermath of widely publicised events such as the Dover and Morecambe Bay tragedies (see, for example, Yang's 2021 analysis of media reports in relation to the Dover incident). Since such events, attention has turned to other forms of irregular entry. Although the large-scale smuggling of Chinese migrants into the UK via land and sea has since decreased, Chinese migrants continue to enter the country clandestinely or shift to an undocumented status due to the expiry of a visa (Bloch & McKay, 2016, p.58-66). Once they have arrived in the UK, some Chinese migrants remain subjected to an undocumented status for up to and over a decade. For those who remain, government statistics suggest that Chinese nationals are amongst the most vulnerable to exploitation in society. For example, of the total potential victims of modern slavery in England referred into the National Referral Mechanism in 2021, Chinese nationals were seventh most referred for labour exploitation and fifth for sexual exploitation (HO, March, 2022).

Despite the persistence of irregular Chinese migration to the UK and the evidence of potential exploitation, the issue is rarely on the front covers of UK newspapers. Instead, migrants entering the country via small boats at the English Channel have come to represent 'illegal' migration in the public imagination. As Knowles (2017) wrote in her discussion of the Chinese in London, "the Chinese are one of the UK's neglected minorities" (p.458). The small size and geographic dispersion of the UK Chinese perhaps explains why they are missing from much social research about minority groups (an argument advanced by Mok & Platt, 2020, amongst others). Additionally, as I argue in chapter two, the academic study of irregular Chinese migration occupies a marginal position in the broader body of knowledge about undocumented

statuses which has been dominated by North American accounts of Latino migration. In this respect, undocumented Chinese migrants represent an under researched group.

Alongside the relative lack of attention that undocumented Chinese migrants have received in the broader literature related to irregular migration, Chinese migrants have also been subjected to contradictory cultural stereotypes. The Chinese in the UK have been celebrated as an “ethnic-minority success story” (Parker & Song, 2009, p.587), and described as “hard-working and law-abiding” (HMSO, 1985, p.vii). Such constructions of the UK Chinese have perhaps been influenced by what Ong (1998) described as “images of Oriental docility” in which “diligence, self-sufficiency, and productivity” have come to characterise stereotypical constructions of Asian minority groups as ‘good citizens’ (p.151). Conversely, the UK Chinese have also been associated with criminality, smuggling, gambling and exploitation (Benton & Gomez, 2008, p.132-134; Silverstone & Whittle, 2016). In addition to such contradictory constructions, incidents of racist abuse and harassment directed at Chinese individuals have increased in recent years due to racialisation of the COVID-19 virus which originated in Wuhan, China. Chinese people in the UK have been subjected to increased racist slurs and discriminatory terms associated with the virus, such as “the Chinese virus” and “Kung Flu” (Gao & Sai, 2021, p.183). In Europe, similar increases in racism directed towards people of Chinese origin have been documented (see, for example, França, Gaspar & Mathias, 2022, in Portugal, and Wang, Chen, Li, Luu, Yan & Madrisotti, 2021, in France). In view of both the under-researched nature of undocumented Chinese migration and the contradictory constructions to which Chinese in the UK may be subjected, the purpose of this thesis is to develop understanding about the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants.

### **1.2.4 Undocumented migration and social work**

That undocumented Chinese migrants are highly vulnerable to exploitation and subjected to contradictory and racist stereotypes should be of concern to both social work practitioners and academics. The global definition of social work emphasises the ethical principles of social justice and human rights (IFSW, 2014). Undocumented migrants represent a part of society with no recourse to justice and, to use the Arendtian concept, they have no ‘right to have rights’ (Krause, 2008). Yet, as discussed in chapter two, none of the published studies about irregular Chinese migration retrieved during my review of the existing literature focused on social work practice with undocumented Chinese migrants, nor did I find any studies written from a social work disciplinary background. This is concerning given that previous studies have indicated that the UK Chinese underutilise health and social care services (Rochelle & Shardlow, 2014). Williams, in a 2020 publication about the state of social work research about race/ethnicity, posed a challenging question to social work academics: “does our disciplinary research enterprise tell the story of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith nature of our societies?” (p.1059). In relation to undocumented Chinese migrants, the answer to Williams’ question is a resounding ‘no’. This study is located within this gap in the social work literature. In this thesis, I invite social work audiences to engage with the ‘hot and bitter tears’ in the narratives of Chinese migrants.

### **1.2.5 Research paths not taken**

I originally set out on this research journey with both different research questions and a different approach in mind. Although the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants were always at the forefront of this study, I originally planned to recruit young people, between the

ages of 16 and 24 years old, who faced a shift to an undocumented legal status as they became adults. Methodologically, I planned to conduct narrative interviews alongside photo-elicitation interviews to develop a creative and multi-modal representation of participants' experiences. My earlier focus on young people was influenced by my professional background as both a Family Project Worker at a Chinese charity and a Child and Family Social Worker in a statutory setting. The early design of my doctoral research was also a logical extension of the MA research project I conducted in 2013: a photovoice project with Chinese migrant young people in Manchester designed to examine their experiences of life in the city. However, during fieldwork, I struggled to recruit enough young people with the relevant experiences. Instead, I met and developed research relationships with mostly working age irregular migrants who were eager to share their stories during interviews, but reluctant to engage with photo-elicitation methods (see chapter three for a discussion of how the methodology was amended in response to participants' preferences). Therefore, the focus of the study evolved, and I modified the research aims to ask meaningful questions about the detailed participant narratives collected.

Another research path not taken but included in the early stages of the project design was concerned with social work practice with undocumented migrants. My intention was to examine, what Williams and Graham (2016) termed, "both sides of the social services counter" (p.3). I had hoped to explore the points of convergence between service user and professional perceptions, and the gaps, omissions and misconstructions. However, I encountered two barriers to this practice-based research trajectory, both of which, again, related to the realities of fieldwork. First, the Chinese migrants I interviewed had limited understanding of social work in the UK. As discussed in chapter three, the term 'social worker' (社会工作者) in Chinese was often conflated with the term for 'voluntary worker' (义工) and interviewees had rarely encountered social work

professionals. Second, of the social workers contacted, a limited number had encountered undocumented *Chinese* migrants. Therefore, in consultation with the supervisory team, I conducted interviews with social work professionals as part of a sister study to the PhD. The findings of the sister study were reported in an article published online in the *British Journal of Social Work* in June 2022, (Machin & Shardlow, 2022, see appendix A). These research paths not taken reflect the practical challenges involved in engaging undocumented migrants in empirical research. However, as discussed in chapter eight, they revealed fruitful avenues for further research.

### **1.2.6 The key terms used in the study**

#### ***‘Undocumented’***

All researchers engaged with scholarship about undocumented migration are tasked with selecting and justifying the terms they use to describe the range of irregular legal statuses that exist in different national contexts. The Chinese term, “没有身份”, used by most of the participants in this study, translates as ‘statusless’ or ‘no status’. ‘Statusless’ has been used to describe the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK by both Hsaio-Hung Pai (2008), the London-based journalist and writer, and Luo in her unpublished PhD research (2021). Whilst I acknowledge the epistemic value of using a translation of participants’ own words to describe irregular status, my experience of presenting preliminary PhD findings indicated that the term ‘statusless’ held little meaning for social workers. Instead, social workers in the UK tended to use terms derived from policy, such as ‘no recourse to public funds’ and ‘unaccompanied’. Although recognisable to professional audiences, I was wary of tying the

study too narrowly to policy categories that work to naturalise irregular statuses which are legally constructed. Policy-derived terms also belie the fluidity of irregular migration statuses. The term ‘illegal migrants’ was also instantly recognisable to social workers but has obvious pejorative connotations and a dehumanising affect.

An alternative term, ‘new explorers’, was suggested to me during a research workshop I coordinated at Fudan University, Shanghai. The Chinese professor of population studies who offered the suggestion had migrated internally from Fujian province to Shanghai. He took issue with the negative framing that the terms ‘irregular’ and ‘undocumented’ may create. He also argued that many of the terms used by receiving countries misrecognised the historical tradition of overseas exploratory emigration from Fujian and other regions in China. Whilst I agreed with him, the word ‘new’ applied poorly to the participants of this study, eight of whom had lived in the UK between ten and 16 years, and three of whom were brought to the UK as children by parents. The noun, ‘explorers’, whilst suggestive of a sense of adventure, discovery, and hope, also seemed a poor match for participants’ narratives. Whilst some participants may have set out on their migration journeys as ‘new explorers’, the reality of an undocumented life was characterised by the intense physical demands of precarious work, and the immobility created by an irregular status.

To strike a balance between representing Chinese migrants’ stories faithfully and using terms that were meaningful to social work and other academic audiences, I follow the lead of prominent authors in the field (such as Bloch et al., 2014 and Bloch & McKay, 2016) by adopting the term ‘undocumented’ in this study. ‘Undocumented’ covers a range of migration statuses. It also reflects the fact that migration statuses are highly stratified (Sainsbury 2012) and they operate beyond the binary of ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’. I followed Paraskevopoulous’s (2011) lead

and adopted a broad definition of ‘undocumented status’ to include; semi, temporary and discretionary legal statuses. For the purpose of style, I use the terms ‘undocumented’ and ‘irregular’ interchangeably in this thesis.

### ***‘Chinese’***

Given that the term ‘Chinese’ may refer to people with a wide range of national, regional, cultural and linguistic identities, and different migration trajectories, the meaning of ‘Chinese migrant’ in this study requires clarification. In this thesis, I have focused empirically on the narratives of migrants from mainland China and Hong Kong only. Although the UK Chinese population also includes Taiwanese, Malaysian, Singaporean and Vietnamese-born Chinese, amongst others (Mok & Platt, 2020), I did not include these groups in the study due to the different historical migration trajectories and political contexts from which and to which they may have migrated.

### ***‘Sending and receiving countries’***

In my analysis of Chinese migrants’ narratives, I paid close attention, where relevant, to the relationship between participants’ pre-migratory lives and their lives in the UK. However, I intentionally avoided the terms ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries. ‘Home country’ suggests an enduring orientation and loyalty toward China which undermines the belonging and identities participants may have formed in the UK (an issue discussed by Benton & Gomez, 2008, p.20). Additionally, the term ‘host country’ creates an image of migrants as ‘guests’ who are both temporary visitors and indebted to their hosts. Participants in this study were neither guests, nor indebted: at the time of their interviews, all participants planned to remain in the UK indefinitely and, through their labour, had contributed to the UK economy. As an alternative to ‘home’ and ‘host’, I use the terms ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ / ‘destination’ countries. Although such terms

tend to deemphasise the agency of migrants and conceal the complexity of migration journeys, they offer a more neutral representation of migrants' relationships with their countries of origin and their countries of residence.

### **1.3 Chinese migration to the UK**

Chinese migration to the UK has a long history in which Chinese migrants have been subjected to a shifting landscape of immigration policies, enacted at different historical junctures, in response to changing government priorities, public events and public attitudes. In the discussion below, I provide a brief history of Chinese migration to the UK. The discussion is selective, rather than comprehensive. I have focused on the key historical events and policy orientations that have shaped the current UK Chinese population.

The earliest Chinese visitors to the UK, scholars, artists, and diplomats during the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), were welcomed as representatives of Sino-European intellectual exchange (Benton & Gomez, 2008, p.22). During both the First and Second World Wars, thousands of Chinese seafarers were actively recruited to join the British merchant fleet or to work as soldiers for Britain and her allies (Jones, 1979). In the 1950s and 60s, large numbers of Chinese mostly from the New Territories of the then British colony Hong Kong, migrated to the UK against the backdrop of both rising rural unemployment in Hong Kong and economic boom in the UK. These new 'colonial subjects' found work in Chinese catering which, due to a revolution in UK food, experienced an economic boost (Benton & Gomez, p.37). The next major event in the history of Chinese migration to the UK occurred in the 1980s and 1990s when China's Opening Up policies created opportunities for large numbers of Chinese mainlanders to migrate to Europe. Fujian in Southeast China became a major sending region of emigration to the UK. Due

to the increasingly limited options of legal entry, many Fujianese migrants entered the UK ‘illegally’, often via people smuggling operations (Pieke et al., 2004, p.23). Another thread in the history of Chinese emigration began in the late 1990s with the migration of urban Chinese from Northeast China. The majority of North easterners were students or urban workers who had lost their jobs due to industrial reforms. In contrast with Fujianese migrants, almost all the North easterners entered the UK legally, subject to student, visitor, business or work visas (Pieke & Xiang, 2010). Urban and educated migrants from the Northeast are often conceptualised as having different characteristics compared with earlier emigrants from Fujian due to their legal routes of entry. However, in reality, the distinction is less clear: many Chinese from the Northeast overstayed visas or destroyed their documents to claim asylum (Pieke & Xiang, 2010). In recent years, Chinese students, mostly from mainland China, represent a large proportion of the UK Chinese population. According to Universities UK, 143,820 Chinese students were studying in the UK between 2020-21. Given the diverse migration history between China and the UK, the UK Chinese community is highly heterogenous and composed of people with different linguistic, national, and regional identities.

In the context of this diverse migration history, UK policy toward Chinese emigration reflects a series of contradictions. As discussed, governments have, during times of war and economic need, actively encouraged and recruited Chinese labour. However, during periods of peace and relative economic stability, governments have targeted Chinese migrants for involuntary removal. In 1940s Liverpool, for example, the stories of legally settled Chinese men who were secretly “rounded up at night by police and Home Office officials” and sent back to China on cargo ships, leaving their families behind, have recently surfaced since the opening of a set of records in the early 2000s at The National Archives at Kew (Lee, 2016, p.1). The forced

removals of legally settled Chinese men were accompanied by increasing anti-Chinese feeling in the UK, reinforced by racist stereotypes about an invasion of Chinese. The relationship between the UK and the people of Hong Kong also represents a downgrading over time in terms of rights: the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act converted Hong Kong nationals from commonwealth citizens into ‘aliens’ and the 1981 British Nationality Act repealed the rights of colonial subjects to enter or settle in the UK (Benson, 2021). Although the recent Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa appeared to reinstate the rights to citizenship for some Hong Kong nationals, Benson (2021) argued that the scheme represented the government’s attempt to assert its global and moral importance on the world stage post-Brexit, rather than an act of generosity to a former colony.

Chinese migrants in the UK, alongside other minority ethnic groups, have also been affected by the increasingly stringent immigration controls and practices brought about by the ‘hostile environment’: a set of laws and policies that have brought border controls into parts of civil society. Primarily enforced via the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, the hostile environment was designed to encourage the voluntary return of irregular migrants by mandating that employers, landlords, healthcare workers, educators and other public sector workers monitor the immigration status of migrants and racialised ‘others’ (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). The increased use of raids on minority ethnic businesses, including Chinese restaurants and takeaways, have been described as discriminatory (Bloch, Kumarappan & McKay, 2015) and have resulted in protests amongst UK Chinese communities (Marsh, 2018). It is within these contradictory state positionings, which are historically grounded and subject to change, that Chinese migrants live out their migration stories.

#### **1.4 Policy context: Pathways into an undocumented status**

In this thesis, I describe three pathways into an undocumented status experienced by participants in the study: i) an irregular entry; ii) growing up into an undocumented status; and iii) a semi-documented status, such as a work or spouse visa. Below, I describe the specific conditions and entitlements of these three pathways into irregularity to provide context to the migration stories examined in this thesis.

- i) **Irregular entry.** Individuals who entered the UK irregularly, such as Jin (金) whose story is presented in chapter four, are treated as ‘illegal’ migrants with limited rights to social support. They are ineligible for mainstream welfare, but they are entitled to primary healthcare (Jolly, 2018).
- ii) **Growing up into an undocumented status.** Children who entered the UK with their parents or to join other family members may be undocumented, or they may be subjected to a dependent visa. If, as in the case of Sarah (chapter four) and John (chapter six), their parents’ visa expired or was invalidated, they would become subjected to an undocumented status. Until they reach adulthood, undocumented children are defacto ‘legal’ due to their status as children and they are, as such, entitled to compulsory education. However, when they grow up into an undocumented status, they are required to regularise their status to remain legally in the UK.
- iii) **Semi-documented statuses.** For migrants who hope to work in the UK, there are avenues for ‘skilled workers’ to enter with employer sponsorship. The conditions of entry for ‘skilled workers’ have been subjected to change over the past two decades with the introduction of the Tier based system in 2008 (after the enactment of the

Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006) which was subsequently replaced by the Skilled Worker sponsor licence introduced in 2020. The two participants in this study who entered the UK subject to a 5-year work visa were subjected to an older system – a sector based scheme that allowed the recruitment of unskilled workers from overseas in response to labour shortage and demand in certain employment sectors (Kagan et al., 2011). In this study, two male participants, Wang (王) and Fei Hong (飞鸿), were sponsored by Chinese restaurateurs to enter the UK as Chinese chefs. After five years, they were able to obtain leave to remain and to apply for dependents, such as their spouses and children, to join them in the UK, subject to language and financial requirements. Four of the women who participated in this study had entered the UK as the spouses of husbands who either held work permits or had been granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK after being subjected to a work permit (Nian Zhen [念真], Zhan Fang [绽芳], Meng [梦] and Yellow Flower [黄花]). For women who were dependent on their spouses' legal status for their own right to remain in the UK, the breakdown of their relationship could lead to the invalidation of their spouse visa, as was the case for Yellow Flower, whose story is presented in chapter six. In this thesis, I refer to such conditional and temporary visas or permits as semi-documented statuses.

## **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis consists of eight chapters, including this introductory chapter. In this chapter, I have introduced the focus and key themes of the thesis and outlined my motivation and rationale for undertaking, specifically, a study of undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences. I have explained how the empirical phase of the study developed and justified my use of key terms. Additionally, I have outlined a brief history of Chinese migration to the UK and UK policy responses to undocumented migration to provide context to the chapters that follow. Next, I describe the structure of the thesis and outline what the reader can expect to find in each chapter.

In chapter two, a review of empirical and grey literature related to undocumented Chinese migration is presented, with particular reference to studies conducted in the UK. The discussion of the literature is divided into three broad themes: the causes of irregular Chinese migration; irregular status and employment; and family relationships, social networks and encounters with institutions. From this review, I identified seven areas for further inquiry. Amongst these seven areas, three were concerned with; lesser studied paths into an undocumented status (such as the expiry of a visa); the long-term experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants who remain in their destination countries for up to and over a decade; and the experiences of undocumented Chinese women, which have been poorly represented in the literature. These emerging issues shaped both the focus of the thesis and the methodological approach taken, which is outlined in chapter three.

Chapter three contains a critical discussion of the methodological orientation of the study – narrative inquiry - and outlines the fit between the methodology and the research aims. A descriptive account of the research process is presented, which included: the pilot study; the sites of the study; access and recruitment; and conducting narrative interviews. Participant

demographics, such as experiences of undocumented status, pre-migratory lives, and length of time in the UK, are also detailed in this chapter. Then, space is given over to the approach to narrative analysis, in which I drew on: both paradigmatic and narrative modes of analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995); the concepts of broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); and models of personal narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). The chapter ends with a discussion of the ethical and epistemological tensions involved in the close analysis and presentation of long form data used to represent the lives of undocumented Chinese migrants.

Chapters four, five and six present my interpretation of undocumented Chinese migrants' narratives created during the study. All three chapters contain three participant narratives presented alongside my analysis of the key themes and narrative techniques used by participants to tell their stories. In chapter four, the narratives of Jin (金), Sarah and Wang (王) are discussed in relation to the first research question: how did Chinese migrants experience the shift to an undocumented status? The second research question – how did Chinese migrants experience everyday life with an undocumented status? - is examined in chapter five in relation to Yu Yan (语嫣), Nian Zhen (念真) and Feng Mian's (风眠) stories. In chapter six, I have interpreted Yellow Flower (黄花), John and Fei Hong's (飞鸿) narratives in the light of the third research question; how did Chinese migrants experience the status journey over time? In my commentary at the end of chapters four, five and six, I draw together the commonalities between the narratives presented and the wider data set in terms of: the narrative themes, plots, construction of character and affective expression.

In chapter seven, the discussion chapter, I draw on the concept of liminality to describe the legal and social conditions and the subjective experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. Three forms of liminality are discussed: liminal law and status; liminal social and economic places; and liminal time. I suggest that, rather than representing a bounded period, the liminal states and statuses in Chinese migrants' narratives were open ended. I argue that, for the most socioeconomically deprived participants, liminality was not a new condition but a continuation of forms of vulnerability and inequality to which they had been subjected prior to their migration. The intersection of an undocumented status with other biographical and structural factors is explored through the discussion in this chapter, with particular reference to gender.

In the final chapter, my reflections and overall conclusions are presented. The chapter begins with a reflection on the strengths of the study and the limitations imposed by the research design. Next, the outcomes of the study are outlined. Here, I draw on the interpretations of the narratives in chapters four, five and six and the discussion in chapter seven to outline my overall conclusions in relation to the overarching aim of this thesis and the three research questions. Next, I discuss the value of the methodology – narrative inquiry underpinned by ethnographic principles – in the study of undocumented Chinese migration. Then, I suggest that, from the interpretation of migrants' narratives, implications for professional social work practice may be drawn, which relate to three themes: relationship building; safe places and community mediators; and the division of social work from immigration enforcement. Finally, I suggest ways in which the research idea may be extended through further study.

## **Chapter 2 Review of literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I outlined the overarching aim that guided this study: to explore the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. In this chapter, I present a review of the existing literature related to undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences within which the current study is located. I have used three themes, derived from the literature, to organise the review: i) the causes of irregular Chinese migration; ii) irregular status and employment; and, iii) family relationships, social networks and encounters with institutions. The chapter ends with a discussion of the nature of the existing literature and the research gaps and emerging areas of scholarship. In view of these knowledge gaps, I outline how the three research questions that underpinned the study were developed.

### **2.2 Review approach**

This chapter is based on a narrative review of empirical and grey literature related to undocumented Chinese migration. In the discussion below, I outline the search strategy, the approach to analysis and evaluation of the literature and the limitations of this review.

#### **2.2.1 Search strategy**

I conducted the literature search in two phases. During phase one, I drew on systematic approaches to literature reviews (informed by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre [EPPI-Centre] guidelines) to develop a review protocol. The protocol included: an initial scoping review to map and categorise the literature; a research question; a

search strategy; inclusion criteria to screen and identify relevant literature and exclude irrelevant results; and quality appraisal tools. Keyword searches were conducted in three databases: Web of Science, EBSCO Host and ProQuest (which includes the Applied Social Sciences Index and Social Services Abstracts). The key words used to search for relevant literature were: “Chinese” AND “undocumented migra\*” OR “irregular migra\*” OR “clandestine migra\*” OR “illegal migra\*” OR “sans papier\*” OR “liminal migra\*”. Reference lists of key articles were also searched for relevant studies. Studies that reported empirical findings about the circumstances and experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants were sought. No limitations in terms of: date of publication; geographical location; or methodological approach were applied to the search. I anticipated that the empirical literature related to the UK context would be limited. Therefore, I also included grey literature and unpublished theses which related to the UK context as these texts provided a useful backdrop for my interpretation of Chinese migrants’ narratives presented in chapters four, five and six. Only studies published in English were included for review.

During phase two, I updated the original search to ensure that the review included recently published literature. I conducted key word searches of Google Scholar and searched the reference lists of key articles for further relevant references. I also searched the publication lists of key authors identified during phase one for relevant recent publications. I then retrieved and included relevant publications in the analysis of literature.

### **2.2.2 Interpretation of the literature**

The aim of the review was to develop an interpretative analysis of the studies identified. This was appropriate given both the interpretive orientation of the current study and the variation

in research approaches, national contexts and concepts in the literature. In the evaluation of existing literature, I considered the strengths and weaknesses of the studies, the methodological assumptions, the methods deployed, the way that key concepts had been defined and used, and the gaps and omissions. I also considered how the literature had moved on from earlier, foundational texts to describe a broad research direction within which to locate the current study.

### **2.2.3 Limitations of the review**

This review of literature is limited in several ways. Given the focus on English language material, relevant studies published in Chinese or other languages were excluded from the review. This means that publications in languages other than English which may contain important information about the topic of undocumented Chinese migration have been omitted from the review. However, Pisarevskaya, Levy and Sholton, in their 2020 review of migration studies, argued that English had become the “lingua-franca for academic research on migration” (p.477), which suggests that a review of the English language literature is likely to include the key concepts and issues in the field. Additionally, the political sensitivities involved in the academic study of irregular emigration from China (as noted by Pieke et al., 2004, pp.7-8) may have limited the number of relevant studies published in Chinese.

Another limitation of the study relates to the search terms used to retrieve relevant literature. Undocumented Chinese migration has been the focus of study in different disciplines, such as anthropology (Pieke, Nyiri, Thunø & Ceccagno, 2004), sociology (Bloch, Sigona & Zetter, 2014) and criminology (Chin, 1999). Additionally, some scholars have examined, specifically, undocumented emigration from China (e.g., Liu-Farrer, 2008) whereas others have studied emigration from China more broadly, including regular, semi-regular and irregular migration

statuses and flows (e.g. Wang, 2021). The different disciplinary backgrounds and the varied conceptualisations of undocumented Chinese migration has led to a range of terms used to describe the phenomenon. Such variety in the literature posed challenges for this review and there are, therefore, likely some relevant studies that I was unable to identify.

Finally, the variety of national and local policy contexts within which the studies were conducted means that generalisations about undocumented Chinese migration were difficult to make. Given that ‘illegal’ migratory statuses are created by the historical specificity of national immigration policies (see De Genova, 2004), policy contexts determine who becomes undocumented and who is eligible for regularisation. For example, Wang’s (2021) discussion of Chinese irregular migrants’ use of the “illness clause”, a route to regularisation in French law, is specific to the national policy context within which her ethnography of Chinese migrants in Paris was conducted (p.94). Additionally, local policies, at city or state level, can also shape irregular migrants’ experiences of belonging and integration (an argument advanced by Garcia, 2019, in relation to undocumented Mexicans in the US). Given the effect of both national and local policy contexts on the experience of irregular migration, the multi-sited literature reviewed in this chapter inevitably contained findings that related specifically to the policy contexts under examination.

In the following section, I discuss three themes identified across the literature: the causes of irregular Chinese migration; irregular status and employment; and, family relationships, social networks and encounters with institutions. The presentation of each theme begins with an overview of the literature, followed by a focus on a select number of illustrative studies that represent either typical examples or exceptions within the broader scholarship.

### **2.3 The causes of irregular Chinese migration**

A question that has dominated the study of undocumented Chinese migration is: why have thousands of people from the world's second largest economy emigrated irregularly? In the discussion that follows, I have categorised the way in which this question has been answered in the literature into three different approaches: from an early focus on 'snakeheads' (蛇头), the Chinese term for 'human smugglers'; to an evolving understanding of the migration industry; a turn to the social and structural causes of irregular emigration; and, finally, I have highlighted the limited attention paid to those who shift to an irregular status once in their country of destination.

#### **2.3.1 From snakeheads to a migration industry**

Early attempts to understand the causes of irregular Chinese emigration focused largely on the figure of the snakehead. For example, Chin's (1999) mixed methods study of human smuggling from China to the US described in detail the social organisation of snakeheads and the routes and methods used to transport smuggled migrants ('human snakes', 人蛇) into America. Chin's study was conducted in the aftermath of the Golden Venture tragedy, when a ship that carried 286 undocumented Chinese migrants ran aground in New York and ten Chinese migrants drowned whilst attempting to swim to land. Drawing on a survey of 300 smuggled Chinese in New York; ethnographic fieldwork in sending communities in China; and analysis of newspaper reports, Chin captured the abuse that migrants experienced at the hands of snakeheads and the large sums of money and risk of death endured during long and arduous migration journeys (Chin, 1999). Similar depictions can be found in Smith's (1997) collection of edited essays on Chinese migrant trafficking to the US, in which the operation of snakeheads and the physical,

psychological and sexual abuse endured by undocumented Chinese migrants during migration journeys were presented. Over time, a more complex image of the operation of snakeheads emerged. Zhang and Chin (2002), for example, based on their interviews with 90 snakeheads in China and the US, claimed that snakeheads were not master criminals responsible for driving irregular migration. Rather, they were opportunistic individuals who used their reputation amongst family, friends and fellow villagers to conduct the business of illegal trafficking (Zhang & Chin, 2002). Despite the increasingly nuanced understanding of snakeheads presented in these early published studies, the focus on the criminal aspects of irregular emigration tended to frame Chinese migrants as victims with limited agency.

From the early focus on the figure of the snakehead, scholarship about the causes of irregular Chinese migration has captured a more nuanced picture in which snakeheads are just one part of a complex migration system. Document vendors, state officials (Silverstone, 2011), language schools (Liu-Farrer & Tran, 2019), tourism organisations, and legal officers who file asylum claims, amongst others, have been found to play a role in irregular Chinese migration (Thunø & Pieke, 2005). A number of studies have established that state policies also created the conditions which both pushed and pulled migrants from and to certain locations at particular times in history. For example, in their ethnographic examination of Chinese migration agents and ‘illegal’ employment in the UK, Pieke and Xiang (2010) claimed that a complex migration industry had evolved in response to UK policy attempts to attract ‘desirable’ migrants and to deter ‘undesirables’. Within this system, Pieke and Xiang (2010) argued that ‘legality’ was not an intrinsic quality that migrants did or did not possess. Instead, “‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ were bureaucratic statuses manufactured and commercially supplied in the process of migration” (p.11). Liu-Farrer and Tran (2019), in their study of international education as a gateway into

migration into Japan, came to a similar conclusion in a different national context. In both studies, irregular migration was not constructed as a bounded category of mobility that could be understood through an examination of the criminal practices of snakeheads; instead, irregular migration was an option, amongst other forms of mobility, that could be purchased, or could represent an undesirable inevitability, in response to state policies and migrant resources.

### **2.3.2 Social and structural causes: The case of irregular emigration from Fujian**

Aside from the snakeheads and migration brokers who facilitated migration, authors have also examined the social, cultural and political structures that created the environments within which large scale emigration from China was both possible and desirable. Scholarship related to emigration from Fujian (福建), a region in Southeast China and a major migrant-sending area (侨乡), represents a significant portion of the existing literature on the topic of migrant motivation. In the anthropological scholarship devoted to specific migration flows from Fujian, a consensus has emerged about the complex and multifaceted causes of emigration from the area. The seminal text about migration from Fujian to Europe was authored by Pieke, Nyiri, Thunø and Ceccagno (2004). In their conceptualisation of Fujianese migration to Europe, snakeheads were just one part of a highly varied and complex migration nexus. Based on a total of 106 interviews with officials and emigrant households and 81 household surveys in two migrant-sending villages in Fujian province, they described the specific historical, geographical, economic, political, social and cultural causes of emigration from the region. Fujian's historical role as a major hub of international trade since the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), for example, meant that Fujianese merchants frequently travelled overseas and settled in Southeast Asia. This

created networks of overseas Chinese with whom new migrants could connect after the onset of China's reform and opening up policy from 1978 onwards led to the relaxation of travel from the region. Economically, Fujian also became the focus of considerable government investment and development. In October 1980, Xiamen, a sub-provincial city in Southeastern Fujian, became one of five special economic zones in the People's Republic of China. However, development across the region was uneven and likely led to feelings of relative deprivation for some would-be migrants (Lin & Bax, 2009). Additionally, the lack of arable land for farming limited opportunities for employment across Fujian and likely increased the attraction of migration for work. In the light of these historical and economic factors, the main argument advanced by Pieke et al. (2004) was that specific migration configurations developed from different villages in Fujian to specific European destinations. Drawing on Massey's (1999) structural transformation theory, the authors suggested that a migration flow was triggered first by pioneer migrants, and then established through subsequent chain migration. Once established, these migration configurations created safe arrival conditions for migrants in destination countries and the remittances sent home transformed the sending regions. Over time, local institutions were developed to facilitate migration. According to Pieke et al. (2004), villagers who witnessed these transformations came to view migration as a logical strategy to earn money and bring personal and family success. Other authors have drawn similar conclusions about the complex social-structural causes of Fujianese migration (see, for example, Minghuan, 2012, in relation to the illicit migration and employment practices of Fujianese migrants in Israel, Liu-Farrer, 2008, in relation to irregular Fujianese migration to Japan, and Liang and Ye, 2001, for a discussion of the effect of relative deprivation on the motivations of Fujianese migrants in New York). The case of emigration from Fujian, a major source of undocumented Chinese migration to the UK,

suggests that the causes of Chinese irregular emigration are multifaceted and have their roots in the socio-economic and political history of the region and the relationships created with receiving regions.

### **2.3.3 From border crossers to shifts in status**

Many of the key studies discussed above have focused on Chinese migrants who have entered countries irregularly. This approach explains why undocumented Chinese migrants' means and methods of entry have been the subject of intense inquiry. This preoccupation in the literature is aligned with political treatment of the topic of undocumented migration. When politicians make pledges about reducing 'illegal' migration, they evoke stereotypical images of people who have been smuggled across national borders, climbed walls, jumped fences, and arrived in small boats. Yet, beyond national borders, migrants can become undocumented in ways that fall outside of stereotypical images of clandestine border crossers. For example:

- young migrants may grow up into an undocumented status (Gonzales, 2011);
- students, tourists and workers may overstay or fail to fulfil visa requirements (Vaughan & Huennekens, 2018);
- individuals may experience a relationship breakdown which invalidates a spousal visa (Voolma, 2018); and
- failed asylum seekers may become undocumented when they have exhausted their rights to appeal (IPPR, 2006).

These status changes often occur long after migrants have crossed borders. In comparison with the academic interest in Chinese smuggling operations, much less is known about Chinese

migrants who shift to an undocumented status when they are already in destination countries.

This gap in the literature stands in contrast with the North American scholarship on Latino migrants. For example, there is an extensive literature about undocumented Latino young people who transitioned to illegality when they reached adulthood (prominent examples include Abrego, 2006 and Gonzales, 2011). Scholars of Chinese migration who have engaged with this topic of diverse pathways into irregular status are scant, but I found three exceptions in the international literature.

The first example is drawn from the United States. As part of a larger project, Hsin and Aptekar (2022) interviewed ten undocumented Chinese migrants in New York, four of whom had entered the US irregularly and six of whom had overstayed a tourist visa. Hsin and Aptekar found that there were differences between Chinese visa overstayers and Chinese irregular entrants. For example, migrants from urban areas in China were more likely to acquire a US tourist visa than individuals from rural areas and small cities who struggled to obtain travel documents in China. Additionally, the requirement for Chinese citizens to provide proof of significant financial means to obtain a US tourist visa meant that visa overstayers had access to more economic resources than irregular entrants. They also experienced less trauma during migration journeys which were described as uneventful in contrast with the highly traumatic journeys experienced by those who were smuggled into the US. Such higher levels of capital and direct journeys to the US meant that Chinese visa overstayers were more likely to be granted asylum compared with irregular entrants as visa overstayers had the resources to pay for asylum applications and associated legal representation. Additionally, the direct routes they took to the US contrasted with the journeys of irregular entrants who often experienced non-linear migration journeys which involved stays in third countries which were considered 'safe'. The authors

suggested that migrants' different pathways into undocumented status were affected by pre-migratory background and, in turn, affect migrants' chances of regularisation in destination countries.

The second example is Liu Farrer's (2008) mixed methods study of Fujianese student visa overstayers in Japan. Liu-Farrer drew on: a survey of 218 Chinese migrants; interviews with 45 Fujianese migrants; and participant observation with Fujianese migrants in Tokyo and the surrounding areas. The survey revealed that Fujianese students in Japan were much more likely than Chinese students from other regions to become undocumented migrants. Through grounded analysis of the qualitative data, Liu-Farrer concluded that Fujianese students' closed social networks in Tokyo, which were comprised of largely undocumented migrants from Fujian, facilitated the move from regular student to irregular migrant worker. Within this network, becoming undocumented was a cultural norm and a logical means of survival. Although Liu-Farrer acknowledged that some Fujianese students used student visas as a means of entry to work and earn in Japan, she found that, in the main, her participants did not plan to trade in their student status for an irregular status. Rather, they were forced to make the shift, due to the lack of financial support for international students in Japan and the availability of work through their Fujianese relatives, friends and contacts. In this respect, Liu-Farrer argued, becoming undocumented may be a "social process" for Chinese migrants rather than a planned mode of entry (2008, p.255). Liu-Farrer's study raised questions about the extent of agency undocumented Chinese migrants can exercise in relation to their migration status, especially those from regions associated with irregular migration, such as Fujian.

The third example, a study conducted by Bloch, Sigona and Zetter (2014) in the UK, focused on the experiences of undocumented young people and resonated with the findings of

Liu-Farrer's (2008) study. Bloch et al. (2014) conducted in depth interviews with 75 undocumented young people (aged 18-31), 16 of whom had migrated from China. Participants included rejected asylum seekers, visa overstayers and individuals who had arrived irregularly. Although the focus of the study was the intersection between youth, migration status and agency, a key thread of the analysis centred on 'undocumentedness' as a fluid and mobile status. Bloch et al. (2014) found that young people described 'illegality' as an "episode in their life story", rather than an endpoint (p.152). This suggests that undocumented migration needs to be located within migrants' life stories, rather than examined as an isolated phenomenon.

Bloch et al.'s (2014) study provided important information about undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK, which was grounded in migrants' own experiences and perceptions. The authors identified features of Chinese migrants' experiences that were unique or exaggerated in comparison with the other national/ ethnic groups in the studies. However, perhaps due to the inclusion of migrants from a variety of sending countries, participants' pre-migratory experiences and background, such as region of origin, rural/urban background, and language, were not addressed in any depth in the study.

These three studies, although illuminating, paint a patchy picture of the experiences of Chinese migrants who shifted to an undocumented within the national borders of their destination countries. Taken together, the findings of these diverse studies suggest four key points: i) undocumented migration status is not only a planned mode of entry, but also a social process in which Chinese migrants may move from a regular to an irregular status out of necessity rather than choice; ii) irregular status requires examination as an episode within migrants' life stories, rather than an isolated phenomenon; iii) migrants' pathway into

irregularity is affected by their background and, iv) in turn, their pathway into irregularity affects their chances of regularisation.

## **2.4 Irregular status and employment**

Another major thread in the literature on undocumented Chinese migrants focused on employment. Below, I have organised the discussion of the literature about irregular status and employment around three key themes identified from the studies reviewed: i) the type of employment and working conditions experienced by undocumented Chinese migrants; ii) the nature of work in the Chinese restaurant and takeaway; and, iii) debates concerning the extent of irregular migrant agency vs their vulnerability in the workplace. In this section, I focus largely on literature related to the UK context, as there was sufficient material to capture a sense of the working lives of undocumented migrants. However, I have alluded to studies in other migration destinations for the purpose of comparison in several places.

### **2.4.1 Types of employment and working conditions**

Previous research has established that the types of employment available to undocumented Chinese migrant varied depending on the economic conditions of the receiving country. Chinese ethnic enclaves have developed in different industries, often in response to the economic opportunities available to migrant employees and entrepreneurs in each national context. For example, undocumented Chinese migrants have been found to work: in the Chinese-run garment industry in Southern Europe (see Ceccagno, 2003 on Chinese in Italy); in small shops and market stalls trading in Chinese exports in Eastern Europe (see Nyiri, 2003, on Chinese migrants in

Hungary, Russia, Romania, former Yugoslavia and the Czech Republic) and in Chinese catering in North-western Europe (Benton & Gomez, 2008; Pieke et al., 2004 on Chinese in Britain and Fujianese in Europe, respectively). A unifying theme is that, for most undocumented labourers, work in Chinese ethnic enclaves is the only and, often, preferred choice due to connections along linguistic or hometown ties and the understanding that Chinese employers will not require documents (Bloch, Sigona & Zetter, 2014; Bloch & McKay, 2016).

In the UK, undocumented Chinese migrants' working conditions have been examined in a series of empirical publications and reports. For example, Bloch and McKay (2016) conducted a qualitative study of undocumented migrant workers and employers in ethnic enclaves in London (the sample included 20 undocumented Chinese migrants). They found that undocumented labourers prioritised finding and maintaining work above any other aspect of their lives in London. Despite this prioritisation, migrants found it difficult to find employment and, once in work, they experienced chronic job insecurity. Many migrants were aware that they would be dismissed if their employers became nervous about immigration raids, or if their business decreased. As irregular workers, they understood that they were at the bottom of the employment hierarchy and, compared to their documented colleagues, they undertook the least skilled roles and earned the lowest wages with no sick pay, holiday, or overtime. With no safety net, no savings and no access to welfare, undocumented migrants felt powerless to contest the working conditions they were subjected to. A similar description of the working lives of undocumented Chinese migrants can be found in Kagan, Lo, Mok, Lawthom, Sham, Greenwood and Baines' (2011) study of Chinese migrants' forced labour in Manchester and Bloch, Sigona and Zetter's (2014) examination of the experiences of young undocumented migrants in London, the

Northwest and the West Midlands. Together, these studies suggest that working conditions for undocumented migrants from China and other national groups were poor.

Unfortunately, it has been suggested that coercion in the workplace is not just confined to migrants with an irregular status. Wu, Guo and Sheehan (2010), in their report about the working conditions of Chinese migrants in the West Midlands, found that Chinese workers subject to a work permit also experienced forced labour in both Chinese catering and Traditional Chinese Medicine clinics. Wu, Guo and Sheehan reported that employers regularly confiscated work-permit holders' passports after their arrival in the UK to prevent them from finding work elsewhere. Employers also took large cash deposits and deducted wages from workers to incentivise them to stay, despite the poor working conditions and low pay. Afraid of losing their work permit and, consequently, sabotaging their chance of acquiring permanent residence in the UK, Chinese workers had few options but to remain with their exploitative employers. Workers' limited knowledge of UK immigration laws and poor grasp of English further exacerbated migrant workers' vulnerability. In comparison with undocumented Chinese workers who were not dependent upon their employers for their immigration status, Wu, Guo and Sheehan (2010) suggested that work-permit holders were tied to their employers by their permits, which created a form of bonded labour. In this respect, the authors suggested that both undocumented and semi-documented status may result in vulnerability and exploitation in the workplace. The differences and commonalities between different migration statuses and how they shape the work experiences of Chinese migrants require further examination.

## **2.4.2 The nature of work in the Chinese restaurant and takeaway**

In the UK, Chinese migrants' experiences of work in the Chinese catering industry has received most attention in empirical studies. This is likely because the Chinese catering industry is the major source of work for Chinese with an irregular migration status in the UK. Other jobs include working in construction and in private domestic roles, such as a nanny or cleaner (Kagan et al., 2011; Bloch & McKay, 2016). According to Benton and Gomez's (2008) historical analysis of the Chinese in Britain, Chinese catering replaced and, in terms of the small scale and private business model, imitated the earlier Chinese laundries that had developed to serve the mostly male Chinese seafarers around major British ports. The Chinese chef, waitress and takeaway worker have become predominant stereotypes of the Chinese in the UK (Chau & Yu, 2001). As restaurants and takeaways have, historically, been largely owned by Chinese migrants from the New Territories and other Southeast Asian Chinese migrants, undocumented Chinese with less capital and fewer social networks have tended to be employed as waged labourers rather than entrepreneurs (Pieke et al., 2004). In the discussion below, I review literature related to the nature of work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways in the UK. This literature sets the scene for the empirical chapters of this thesis in which the majority of the participants had worked or were working in Chinese restaurants or takeaways at the time of their interviews.

Perhaps the most detailed accounts of work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways were conducted by Kay (1990) and Song (1999). Both studies, although not specifically focused on irregular Chinese migrants, captured the experience of working in Chinese catering establishments in the UK. They stand out in the broader literature about Chinese migrant workers as both Kay and Song focused on the experiences of women and children, respectively. Kay's (1990) ethnography of a Chinese restaurant in Manchester, for example, detailed both the

occupational demands of the work of a waitress (what Kay termed the “forgotten whatness”, p.190) and the role of gender and ethnicity in the Chinese restaurant. Kay described the skills required to work as waitress in a Chinese restaurant as both practical – the competencies of waitressing – and interactional – the skills involved in managing customers, staff and the boss. In her analysis of gender in the restaurant, Kay described a dynamic in which both subtle and explicit actions, comments and non-verbal behaviours by both customers and male colleagues worked to exert power over the female workers. She also delineated in her analysis between the “out front” (p.194), or customer-facing, space of the restaurant and the “out back” (p.200) space. Waitresses constantly juggled the demands of the two spaces and faced different forms of gender discrimination in each. Song’s (1999) study of Chinese takeaways shared certain similarities with Kay’s ethnography in that Song also focused on gender and interactions in the setting. However, reflective of the family business model of the Chinese takeaway in the UK, Song focused on how the takeaway affected family life and how family life served the needs of the business. She argued that family life was ordered by the demands of the Chinese takeaway: children grew up in the takeaway, with almost every aspect of their daily lives and their decisions about the future made with reference to the family business. Both studies were conducted over two decades ago and focused on the established Cantonese and Hakka-speaking Chinese in the UK, many of whom migrated in the 1960s and 70s, had a regular migration status and ran family takeaways or restaurants. They captured the working dynamics of Chinese restaurants and takeaways before the influx of ‘new’ migrants from mainland China from the 1990s onwards. Their descriptions of work and workplace relations in the Chinese restaurant and takeaway provide background material that helps to contextualise later studies about the specific experiences of undocumented Chinese workers.

In two more recent studies, the conditions that undocumented migrant workers experienced in Chinese restaurants and takeaways were described in some detail and the findings resonated with the observations of gender and daily life in earlier studies. For example, Bloch and McKay (2016) found a gender difference in the division of labour in Chinese restaurants: kitchen work was mostly undertaken by men, whereas women found work in front of house roles. Job roles were clearly defined, and pay was generally fixed in relation to role. The fact that food and accommodation was provided as part of the job (often subject to a deduction in wages) made the prospect of losing work frightening. It also had the effect of workers rarely leaving the restaurant which created a sense of entrapment. A 48 year old Chinese migrant in Bloch and McKay's study described his experience of kitchen work as "suffocating", pointing to the "smoke", "puffs from the steam", "the noise [that] comes from the extraction fan", and the "fierce" heat from the oven (p.177). These physical conditions combined with the reliance on employment for survival led to migrants feeling trapped. Furthermore, according to Bloch and McKay, restaurants and takeaways did offer opportunities for progression – from kitchen porter, for example, to a more skilled kitchen role, such as cooking rice and noodles. However, undocumented migrants were rarely employed as chefs and their progression plateaued once they reached a certain level. Although migration status was important, Chinese participants in Bloch and McKay's study referred to the importance of their relationships with the head chef or the manager as the determining factor in whether conditions were tolerable or not. For this reason, workplace relations were important matters.

In a recent ethnography of employment in two Chinese catering businesses in Sheffield, Li (2019) found evidence that work conditions had deteriorated for undocumented workers in recent years. The Chinese migrants with whom Li worked alongside were keenly aware of the

increasingly stringent immigration laws in the UK. They reported that job opportunities were scarce for undocumented workers because of employers' fears of receiving large fines if they were found to have employed an irregular worker. Alongside these changes in immigration laws, the increase in international Chinese students in the UK, mostly from North China, increased competition for low-skilled work in restaurants and takeaways as many students sought work in front of house positions. To find work, according to Li, undocumented migrants were forced to move frequently around the country and to rely on regional ties to open employment opportunities. Once in work, incidents of miscommunication and mistrust were commonplace in Chinese restaurants and takeaways as migrants from different regions and nations tried to work alongside each other.

Given the difficult working conditions, the physically arduous nature of kitchen work, the complex relationships between workers, the job insecurity for undocumented Chinese migrants, and the sense of entrapment, it is curious that very little information has been compiled about the effect of this type of work on Chinese migrants' health. The amount of time required to pay back migration debts, the pressure to make a success of the migration project economically and the limited routes to regularisation in the UK means that migrants are likely to endure these conditions for years, and perhaps for decades. There is limited information available about the effect of work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways over time. In their 2010 report on the working conditions of Chinese migrants in the West Midlands, Wu, Guo and Sheehan (2010) included some brief examples of the type of physical and mental health problems that emerged in their survey. These included: sciatica from long periods standing in kitchens, heart problems due to long working hours combined with late nights in Chinese casinos, lung cancer due to frequent

smoking, and depression and despondency due to the need to endure these conditions for years. With limited access to healthcare, most migrants ignored their symptoms and continued to work.

Together, these studies suggest that work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways was both physically arduous and emotionally taxing. Workplace relationships were difficult and recent studies suggested that the increased heterogeneity of Chinese migrants in the UK in the past two decades has led to frequent miscommunication which likely limited solidarity in the workplace.

### **2.4.3 Agency and vulnerability in work**

It has been suggested in the literature that irregular Chinese workers, although undoubtedly subject to poor working conditions in the context of complex social systems, were not passive victims of exploitative employers. Instead, authors have found that Chinese migrants made use of the resources available to them to avoid the harshest abuses of the workplace. For example, they drew on social networks to source information about employers and to seek alternative employment if they felt disrespected or underpaid (Bloch et al., 2014; Hiah & Staring, 2016; Wu & Liu, 2012). Undocumented migrant women who were subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace were, according to Kagan et al. (2011), able to remove themselves from the situation by seeking alternative work and using their networks to conduct veracity checks on future employers. Bloch et al. (2014) also found that migrant workers relied on friends and relatives to loan money during periods of unemployment and to borrow documents to conduct trade. In periods of labour shortages for Chinese restaurateurs, employers have been found to rely on their employees to introduce other workers to fill vacancies and, for this reason, a reputation as a fair employee has been found to hold value in the Chinese economy (Wu & Liu, 2012). In some rare cases, violence against employers has been reported as a method through which migrants

have obtained deducted or withheld wages (see, for example, Pieke et al., 2004; Hiah & Staring, 2016; Wu & Liu, 2012). Despite their inability to contest poor working conditions, Bloch and McKay (2016) found that Chinese workers in London were strategic: they relied on their networks, leveraged their skills, and used their ability to be mobile to better their position. In an earlier qualitative study of undocumented young migrants in the UK, Bloch (2013) argued that migrants (including Chinese migrants) strategically developed knowledge about employment opportunities to enable them to find work whilst concealing their status: they carefully considered which jobs offered the best conditions, which employers would ask for documents and which would not, who was safe to approach and who to avoid. In these micro judgements and strategies, Bloch (2013) argued that undocumented migrants used their agency and judgements to carefully locate themselves in the co-ethnic economy.

However, the authors reviewed above rarely denied that migrant workers' abilities to exercise agency in the workplace were constrained. The key argument of Lawthom, Kagan, Baines, Lo, Sham, Mok, Greenwood and Gualé's (2013) qualitative study of Chinese migrants' experiences of work was that family responsibilities rendered workers more vulnerable to coercion by employers. Those with families to support, both in China and in the UK, were most willing to tolerate the harshest forms of exploitation in work. Lawthom et al. (2013) drew on traditional Chinese cultural conceptions of filial piety (孝) to describe the psychological pressure that participants felt to pay back migration debts owed to family with interest and to make a success of their migration economically to contribute to their family's success. The authors also invoked the Chinese concept of 'face' (臉) to explain why Chinese migrants were unwilling to share the hardships they had experienced in work with their family in China. This psychological

pressure combined with the need to conceal difficulties led to chronic stress and isolation. In one startling example, a participant in the study described how he had read stories in the Chinese press about irregular migrants who had jumped off the London Bridge due to the pressure they experienced. To avoid this fate, he decided to adjust his expectations and allow himself up to ten years to pay back the debt owed to his family and to make an economic success of his migration. The personal cost of this decision was implied.

Lawthom and colleagues' (2013) important finding about the intersection of work and family responsibilities was possible because of the methodological approach adopted. The authors conducted interviews with 32 Chinese forced labourers (most of whom had an undocumented status). They combined both thematic and narrative approaches to analysis to identify the commonalities across the data set, whilst retaining a sense of the personal stories behind key themes. The authors presented participants' long-form stories, using composites of both the researchers' summaries alongside participants' verbatim accounts. This presentation of long form narratives is rare in the scholarship on undocumented Chinese migration and provided the basis for an analysis of the emotional and psychological lives of the participants. This perhaps reflects the disciplinary background of the main authors, Lawthom and Kagan, who are community psychologists, in a field that is largely dominated by anthropologists of Chinese diaspora, demographers of China, and sociologists of migration. By foregrounding the individual stories of Chinese migrant workers, Lawthom et al. captured the internal struggles and pressures that affected their experiences of work. Perhaps the key message was that undocumented migrants' experiences of work cannot be understood without consideration of their family and social relationships. These are the themes that I turn to in the next section of this chapter.

## **2.5 Family relationships, social networks and encounters with institutions**

In contrast with the preoccupation with the means and methods of irregular border crossing in the earliest published literature, more recent studies related to undocumented Chinese migration have examined migrants' personal relationships, their social worlds and their social needs. In the discussion that follows, I review the literature that related specifically to undocumented Chinese migrants'; family relationships, near and far; transnational social networks; and, encounters with institutions and professionals.

### **2.5.1 Family relationships, near and far**

Whilst many of the key texts already discussed in this chapter note the importance of family relationships in terms of migrant motivations (Pieke et al., 2004) and willingness to tolerate difficult working conditions (Lawthom et al., 2013), few studies have examined the affect of irregular migration on family relationships. This is curious given the commonly reported pattern of family migration in which men often migrated first, followed by their wives and, perhaps after acquiring a regular status, their children. The work of two scholars, Hong Chen and Simeng Wang, stand out against the broader body of knowledge about Chinese emigration due to their focus on the intimate family lives of Chinese migrants, including those subjected to an irregular status.

First, media and communications scholar, Hong Chen, examined Chinese migrants' experiences of family separation and their use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) to sustain transnational family practices. In a series of three connected publications that drew on a three-year, multi-sited ethnography, he examined the perspectives of: 45 mostly undocumented Chinese migrants in London who had endured long term separation from their families in China;

38 left-behind children; and 33 left-behind guardians (including mothers, fathers, grandparents and aunts) in Fuqing, Fujian, China (Chen, 2019; 2020; 2022). Chen's first publication from this data set focused on the London-based migrant parents' use of video calls and social media to parent their children from afar (2019). Chen found that ICT was used to extend both typical (by which he meant traditional and patriarchal) and atypical parenting practices in transnational Chinese families. He argued that parenting practices were shaped by migrants' age, migration status, gender and background. Participants who had been smuggled into the UK, were over the age of 50 and had migrated from rural areas in China, were most likely to be influenced by traditional Chinese conceptions of parenting. Such conceptions assigned different roles to mothers and fathers: mothers were expected to offer care and love whilst fathers were responsible for children's discipline and obliged to provide financially for the family. Interestingly, single migrant mothers in the UK who had acquired regular migration status were found to adopt atypical parenting practices which inverted traditional conceptions of mothers' roles. When regular status gave women opportunities for stable employment, they found a sense of freedom and autonomy in the UK, separated from the daily responsibilities of caring for their left-behind children. Chen's 2019 article also offered insight into the emotional dimensions of being an undocumented parent. For undocumented women, the strongest emotions were caused by the "moral burden of being an absent mother" (p.1819). Undocumented men, on the other hand, felt inadequate if they were unable to fulfil their perceived duty to provide financially for their children due to the insecure employment and debts associated with their migration status. For such fathers, mobile communication with their children became "a painful reminder of their neglect of fathering duties" (p.1819).

Finally, Chen's study of left-behind women (2022) painted a picture of the complex negotiations that take place between absent migrant parents and present parents or caregivers. Although some wives enjoyed the lifestyle afforded by the remittances sent by the migrant partner, they experienced a deep sense of insecurity exacerbated by rumours amongst returnee migrants, about their husbands' fidelity. Left-behind wives also worried that the loss of affection in their relationships with their husbands would lead to remittances no longer being sent home. Grandmothers, too, feared that complaining about the demands of childcare and their own health issues to migrant parents would affect the social security that migrant relatives would provide to them in their older age. Grandmothers in the study felt increasingly insecure when their migrant children gained legal status in the UK as they feared that migrants' attention and economic resources would become focused on the receiving country. This finding challenged the dominant assumption in the literature that regularisation was a positive and sought-after status. Instead, Chen's research suggested a more complex conception of shifts between regular and irregular migration statuses amongst transnational Chinese families.

Whilst Chen's work offered a rare insight into Chinese migrant family separation, Wang's 2021 study of Chinese migrants in Paris included an analysis of family reunification. Wang conducted a four-year ethnography to explore how Chinese migrants, some of whom were undocumented, responded psychologically to their social conditions as immigrants in France. Her ethnography, in which she collected 180 cases for analysis, focused on both psychiatric care facilities and other public and private places in Chinese migrants' lives. One thread of Wang's analysis focused on the left-behind children of Chinese migrants who were subjected to an irregular status in Paris: a group Wang labelled "abandoned children, sacrificed children" (p.115). In a chapter-long discussion, Wang examined the experiences of Chinese children who,

having been ‘abandoned’ in China and left to live with grandparents, were later brought to Paris, often via human smugglers, at the request of their undocumented parents. Wang found that the family reunion was disappointing and led to significant emotional and psychological difficulties for the children and discord for the families. Having endured long and dangerous journeys facilitated by snakeheads, many children of undocumented parents experienced complex intergenerational relationships and roles upon their arrival in Paris. They were expected to support their parents and siblings who were born in France through language brokering, administrative tasks and helping in family businesses. However, the experience of being abandoned, and then being brought to Paris with no status security to live in constant fear of deportation, created familial conflict. Young people experienced embarrassment due to their parents’ low level of education, poor grasp of French, and limited social capital in France. They also felt suffocated by their cramped living spaces and questioned why they were brought to France to endure such difficulties. Over time, Wang found that many young people developed psychiatric disorders, depression and despondency in response to these social conditions. The existence of an ‘illness clause’ in French immigration law meant that such psychological disorders could be used as a resource by undocumented families to secure regular migration status (see Wang, 2020, for a discussion of the ‘illness clause’ and undocumented migration). Being ‘used’ as a resource in this way created emotional distance between these Chinese young people and their parents.

Wang’s (2021) book also captured another form of family conflict experienced by undocumented Chinese migrants: the dissonance caused by the narrative of migration, cultivated by family members and return migrants, compared with the harsh realities of an undocumented life in Paris. Migrants’ parents and relatives who had migrated before them had created an image

of life in Paris as characterised by money, leisure and glamour. This image was at odds with the living conditions with which undocumented migrants were faced. For many, the psychological effect of their shattered illusions of migration were exacerbated by the sense that they had been subjected to a family deceit.

Taken together, the work of Chen and Wang offer valuable insights into the intimate lives of undocumented Chinese migrants and their family relationships, both near and far. Both authors illustrated how undocumented migration, protracted family separation and eventual reunification led to intergenerational conflict. The illusions of migration contrasted sharply with the reality of migrants' harsh social conditions and the emotional and practical difficulties involved in negotiating with left-behind family members. Both Chen and Wang evidenced the deep emotional and psychological affect that these complex family dynamics had on undocumented Chinese migrants' inner lives. Such family dynamics require examination in the study of irregular Chinese migration.

### **2.5.2 Transnational social networks**

The role of social networks in undocumented Chinese migrants' everyday lives is a contested issue in the literature. Whilst few scholars disagree that migrants' networks are an important resource for facilitating and sustaining an undocumented life, the strength of such networks and the availability of social and economic resources via social networks are topics of debate.

Prominent European China scholars, Pieke, Nyiri, Thunø and Ceccagno (2004), placed social networks at the forefront of their interpretation of Fujianese migration to Europe. In their three-year multi-sited ethnography, the authors conceptualised migration from Fujian to Europe

through the lens of transnationalism, which was grounded in the authors' broader theoretical framework of Chinese globalisation. They argued that Fujianese emigration can be understood as one element in the movement of goods, ideas, trade, and people from China to the rest of the world, which accelerated at pace from the 1990s. In their reading of Fujianese migration (both regular and irregular), migrants were part of large and complex social and familial networks which connected individuals with China, and with other international destinations where Fujianese migrants had settled. Pieke and colleagues, in their discussion of transnational practices, depicted Fujianese migrants as highly mobile individuals who used their social networks to travel to different areas in Europe and to bypass the varied and changing immigration policies developed by different European nation states. By drawing on the resources of their social networks, according to Pieke et al., Fujianese migrants seized opportunities for regular status, employment, business, education, and family reunification in different parts of Europe. Similar depictions of Chinese migrants (with both regular and irregular statuses) from other regions and in other European destinations can be found in the European scholarship (see, for example, Guerassimof, 2003, on the Zhejiangese in France). Through this transnational lens, irregular status was constructed as a fluid bureaucratic status ascribed by nation states, rather than a static condition, which may be circumnavigated or, in some circumstances, preferred by Chinese migrants.

In contrast, Benton and Gomez (2008), in their historical study of the Chinese in Britain, have criticised the lack of "historic depth" in transnational studies of Chinese diasporas (p.9). They argued that the practices associated with transnationalism, often connected with contemporary ideas of globalisation, are long-standing behaviours of diasporas when considered in historical perspective. According to Benton and Gomez (2008), studies such as Pieke et al.'s

(2004) treat Chinese migrants as homogenous groups with unified regional and linguistic identities: they obfuscate the connections that migrants make in their destination countries and overstate migrants' enduring orientation toward China.

Further, the findings of a series of sociological studies conducted in the UK also challenged the depiction of undocumented Chinese migrants as transnational and agentic individuals. For example, Bloch and McKay's (2016) examination of undocumented migrants, ethnic enclaves and networks in the UK presented the everyday realities of undocumented migrants in starkly different terms to the image that emerged from Pieke et al.'s (2004) work. Bloch and McKay conducted interviews with 55 undocumented migrants and 24 ethnic enclave employers in London (20 of whom were from China). They argued that, whilst undocumented migrants actively sought to develop their networks to access employment opportunities, their networks were resource poor and offered poor prospects for social mobility. When difficulties arose, such as child illness, or encounters with immigration enforcement, migrants' social networks could not be drawn upon for support. Bloch and McKay also found that undocumented migrants faced barriers to the development of their social relationships: fear of detection, limited language skills, long working hours, and the provision of accommodation alongside work meant that many undocumented migrants had few opportunities to socialise outside of small groups of colleagues and they experienced intense loneliness. Migrants in the study also had to think carefully about who to trust: friendships were often lost when migrants shifted to an irregular status and were forced to conceal their circumstances. Additionally, moving from location to location for work negatively affected social relationships. Interestingly, Sigona (2012), whose findings about the social worlds of undocumented migrants resonated with Bloch and McKay's, also found that length of time in the UK did not correlate with more extensive social networks or stronger ties

with others. Instead, a lack of status over time could destroy relationships and lead to migrants internalising a sense of shame and distrust of others.

From these published studies about the social networks of undocumented Chinese migrants, two contrasting images emerge. In the seminal work of Pieke et al. (2004), they were presented as agentic and autonomous individuals who made use of transnational social networks to seek opportunities, to improve their social and economic standing, and to meet personal and family goals. Yet, in more recent accounts (such as Bloch & McKay, 2016; Sigona, 2012), undocumented Chinese migrants were portrayed as lonely individuals, with weak social ties. Their social networks were found to be resource-poor and burdensome. They faced multiple barriers to relationship building, including limited time, limited language skills, and few opportunities to socialise. Additionally, fear of immigration enforcement led to internalised feelings shame and distrust of others. Perhaps the most pertinent point that can be drawn from these wider debates is that it cannot be assumed that migrants have access to a resource rich, transnational network which will sustain their undocumented life. Similarly, assumptions that Chinese undocumented migrants can draw on co-ethnic solidarity and support in destination countries may be damaging. Instead, the impact of their immigration status on their social networks and the level of social and economic resources available to undocumented migrants require exploration in the context of their specific circumstances.

### **2.5.3 Encounters with institutions and professionals**

Relatively few studies examined undocumented Chinese migrants' interactions with institutions and professionals in their destination countries. However, my search did reveal a small number of studies in which Chinese migrants' interactions with health and welfare services

were examined. In the discussion below, I review studies related to undocumented Chinese migrants' interactions with; healthcare services, community services; and police.

First, the search revealed a handful of studies which focused on specific health practices and needs of undocumented Chinese migrants in various national contexts. For example, Wang, Rathbone and Millard's (2021) ethnographic study of a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) clinic in London found that undocumented Chinese migrants who accessed the clinic: had limited knowledge about mainstream healthcare services; lacked understanding about their eligibility for services; and they preferred to deal with Chinese-speaking clinicians. The authors also claimed that undocumented migrants were at a higher risk of ill health compared with other users of the clinic because: they often had no medical records; their experiences of long and difficult migration journeys with other migrants created specific health risks; their long working hours and intense workload led to physical ailments; and they rarely followed up on the advice of clinicians to have further medical tests or to purchase medication. These findings resonated with the results of a quantitative study of health practices in New York's Chinatown, conducted by Liang and Zhou (2016). They found that undocumented Chinese migrants, compared with their documented counterparts, worked longer hours and were less likely to see a doctor if they experienced illness. Studies have also indicated that undocumented Chinese migrants: experienced a high level of comorbidities; often presented at healthcare organisations at a late stage with severe symptoms and they required immediate treatment (see Seidler, Novak-Zezula & Trummer, 2019, in Vienna); they often prioritised work over medical care; and they demonstrated a poor understanding of health conditions and treatment plans (Kang, Rapkin, Springer & Kim, 2003). Together, these studies suggest that undocumented Chinese migrants experienced significant barriers to accessing mainstream healthcare which, given the health risks

they face, is likely to incur a personal cost on individual migrants and, potentially, a public health cost.

Second, Sigona and Hughes' (2012) research report about irregular migrant children in the UK provided a rare insight into the interactions between undocumented families and a variety of community services. The report was based on interviews with 53 irregular migrants (including 10 parents of undocumented Chinese children) and 30 professionals, including: healthcare workers, educators, local authority officials, MPs and non-statutory support workers. Sigona and Hughes argued that the birth of a child and a child starting school were key transitions in undocumented migrants' family lives in the UK when they encountered professional services. These encounters led to anxiety and fear for undocumented parents, who were afraid of deportation, confused by bureaucratic processes and had limited English language skills to navigate services. This led to parental anxiety which, according to Sigona and Hughes, created family environments that were characterised by chronic stress. This picture of stressed families subjected to irregular statuses resonated with the findings of Yoshikawa's (2011) major study of immigrant families in the US. From the perspective of the professional interviewees in Sigona and Hughes' study, many felt frustrated about the conflict between their support roles and the perceived pressure to be involved in the enforcement of immigration policies. The context of limited public funding for services and regular service restructures also led to the disappearance of services and breakdowns in relationships between professionals and undocumented families. The study illustrated the difficulties involved in professional relationship building between undocumented families and service providers.

Finally, two studies, both conducted in the UK, outlined issues related to undocumented Chinese migration and policing and community safety. In a report commissioned by Norfolk

Constabulary in 2004, Ling and Pemberton presented the findings of their investigation into the circumstances of undocumented Chinese migrants in Kings Lyn, Norfolk. The report was based on interviews and informal conversations with eight undocumented Chinese migrants and key informants. Although their report was localised to a small geographical area in England, the authors presented several interesting findings about the relationship between Chinese migrants and the wider community. For example, Ling and Pemberton found that Chinese migrants in Kings Lyn experienced frequent racist attacks, which included robbery, abusive language in the workplace, violence and vandalism in the community. Such attacks came from both the local community and from Chinese gangs in the area. There was a low tendency to report these crimes to police due to migrants': lack of knowledge that racism was a crime; fear of deportation; fear of revealing the identities of other irregular migrants; and limited English language to communicate with police. Furthermore, migrants associated police with immigration enforcement which deterred them from seeking help from community-based officers.

The conclusions of the Pemberton and Ling report resonated with the findings of Silverstone and Whittle's (2016) examination of police responses to Chinese criminal activity in the UK (including irregular emigration). Drawing on interviews with law enforcement practitioners, Silverstone and Whittle suggested that police struggled to disrupt criminality in UK Chinatowns, such as people smuggling and the production of false identity documents, amongst other crimes. Police faced issues with language barriers: when approached by Chinese individuals, they could not understand if a crime were being reported, and they experienced difficulties gathering evidence in relation to Chinese names, and documents which contained Chinese characters. The title of Silverstone and Whittle's article, "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown" alludes to the final scene in the 1974 film, *Chinatown*. In this scene, the detective protagonist, Jake Gittes, was

encouraged by his associate to drop a case of Chinese criminality due to the impenetrable nature of the corruption and deviance at the heart of Los Angeles' Chinatown. The title of the article, although ironic, perpetuates a pejorative image of UK Chinatowns as places of criminality and corruption. The title, along with the argument extended by Silverstone and Whittle, suggests that in Chinatown, mainstream law enforcement officers were unable to disrupt Chinese 'criminals' or to protect Chinese 'victims', the most vulnerable of whom were undocumented Chinese migrants. Unfortunately, the authors did not engage directly with the views of Chinese migrants themselves.

## **2.6 Discussion of the literature**

Having reviewed the literature retrieved that related to undocumented Chinese migration, I now turn to the thematic and methodological patterns identified in the existing knowledge about the topic. The discussion that follows is divided into three categories: major themes in the study of undocumented Chinese migration; methodological approaches taken to the study of undocumented migration; and research gaps and emerging areas of interest.

### **2.6.1 Major themes in the study of undocumented Chinese migration**

Most of the early published studies about irregular Chinese migration were triggered by tragic events that involved the smuggling and exploitation of Chinese migrants. The grounding of the Golden Venture in New York in 1993 triggered academic interest in North America (e.g. Chin, 1999; Smith, 1997; Zhang & Chin, 2002) and the deaths of Chinese migrants in a lorry in 2000 in Dover, a major port town in South East England and during the Morecambe Bay

cockling disaster in 2004 in the North West of England appeared to trigger study in Europe and in the UK (e.g. Beck, 2007; Pieke et al., 2004; Thunø & Pieke, 2005; Thunø, 2003; Song, 2004). Media depictions of these events sensationalised the role of snakeheads and questioned why Chinese migrants were willing to endure dangerous journeys and exploitative work overseas. In many ways such events, and the way they were reported in the media, framed the academic study of undocumented Chinese migration. Therefore, the predominant themes in the literature relate to: the causes of irregular emigration from China and Chinese migrants' exploitation in irregular employment. Curiosity about clandestine Chinese border crossers and their arrival experiences have remained at the forefront of the existing scholarship. Perhaps given some of the shocking details of the operation of snakeheads and the conditions endured by undocumented Chinese migrants that were reported in the media, the issue of migrant agency appears to have been an important theme in the early academic studies. Chinese migrants have been constructed as individuals with limited autonomy who were either coerced by snakeheads (a key focus of the collection of essays edited by Smith, 1997, in relation to the smuggling of Chinese migrants to the US) or for whom an undocumented status was an inevitability of their social environment (Liu-Farrer, 2008). In contrast, they have also been portrayed as highly agentic individuals who responded to state immigration policies flexibly (Pieke & Xiang, 2010) and could draw upon social networks to enhance their social position through their migration project (Pieke et al., 2004) and to resist the harshest abuses of precarious work in the informal labour market (Bloch & McKay, 2016; Kagan et al., 2011). Yet almost all of the studies reviewed in this chapter outline the hardships experienced by undocumented Chinese migrants and the constraints imposed by an irregular status. In view of such contradictory depictions of migrant autonomy,

the degree of agency that Chinese migrants subjected to an undocumented status were able to exercise appears to be an unresolved issue in the literature.

The studies reviewed in relation to Chinese migrants' employment experiences together suggest that work demanded of migrants: long working hours with no breaks; few or no days off and no holidays; low pay below minimum wage; unreasonable employer demands; physically demanding work; bullying and harassment from employers and colleagues; and no recourse to contest their poor working conditions (e.g., Bloch et al., 2014; Lawthom et al., 2013). The threat of losing work and employers' practice of withholding wages added to migrants' sense of instability and vulnerability (Bloch et al., 2014). In addition, the common practice of employers providing accommodation alongside employment meant that many migrants had few opportunities to leave their workplaces, to develop networks outside of work or to learn English (Bloch et al., 2014; Lawthom et al., 2013). For this reason, the workplace emerged as an important place in many of the studies reviewed, in which migrants spent most of their time. Beyond the workplace, other places in which migrants socialised or frequented were rarely considered. This means that a one-dimensional image of the lives of undocumented Chinese migrants has emerged, in which their everyday lives outside of employment is largely missing from the frame.

In the early studies of undocumented Chinese migration, family relationships were often presented as central to the migration projects of individual migrants. For example, Pieke et al. (2004) argued that, in the case of Fujianese migrants, individuals emigrated "as part of a family strategy for advancement" and that the chief objective of most migrants was to earn money for his or her family (p.195). However, the effect on Chinese migrants' family relationships of an irregular status and, specifically, the long family separations caused by the immobility imposed

by an irregular status, have rarely received attention in the broad body of literature. A small number of studies published in the last decade have attended to the family relationships and practices of undocumented Chinese migrants in some depth (e.g., Chen, 2019; 2020; 2022; Lawthom et al., 2013; & Wang, 2021). Together, the findings of such studies suggested that family responsibilities affected migration decisions and work experiences (Lawthom et al., 2013) and Chinese migrants often managed complex relationships, which evolved over time, with both near and distant family (Chen, 2019; 2020; 2022; Wang, 2021). These complex family dynamics can lead to significant conflict which, in turn, may shape the emotional lives and mental health of undocumented Chinese migrants (Wang, 2021). These recent findings resonate with a turn in the broader literature to the family transformations brought about by undocumented migration, in which family separation and the associated estrangement and emotional distance is a nascent thread of inquiry (see, for example, Gonzales, Sigona, Franco & Papoutsis, 2019, pp.121-143).

Whilst undocumented Chinese migrants' social networks and informal, co-ethnic sources of support have received considerable attention, migrants' interactions with professionals and institutions are understudied issues. The existing studies, which largely related to healthcare and policing (e.g., Wang, Rathbone & Millard's, 2021 & Silverstone & Whittle, 2016), indicated that Chinese migrants experienced barriers to the development of supportive relationships with professionals. These barriers related both to the constraints of an undocumented status, and also to migrants' language difficulties and limited knowledge of services and professionals' limited access to Chinese language interpreters /translators. Whilst many undocumented Chinese migrants were reluctant to approach mainstream services, professionals felt conflicted by their contradictory mandates to both support individual migrants in need, and to enforce immigration controls (Sigona & Hughes, 2012). Consideration of Chinese migrants' encounters with key

professional groups, such as social workers and educators, was largely missing from the literature. By contrast, undocumented Latino migrants' encounters with a range of services and professionals in the US is a more developed part of the broader scholarship related to irregular migration (e.g., Gonzales, 2011 on education, Hall & Greenman, 2013 on housing, Jimenez, 2021 on healthcare and Slayter & Križ, 2015 on social work encounters with undocumented migrants).

Despite the inclusion of Chinese women in the empirical work conducted by many of the authors reviewed in this chapter, few publications contained an analysis of how gender affected the experiences of migrant women subjected to an irregular status. A select number of studies about Chinese migrants' work experiences attended to the differences in relation to gender. For example, job opportunities for women were found to be limited to front of house roles in Chinese restaurants and takeaways (Bloch & McKay, 2016; Li, 2019). Undocumented Chinese men, by contrast, were able to secure kitchen roles which attracted higher wages, although their progression and earning power was also constrained by an irregular status (Bloch & McKay, 2016). Interestingly, the employment sectors outside of Chinese catering that Chinese women were employed in received little attention in the literature, aside from a brief mention in the work of Kagan et al. (2011) of women's roles in private domestic settings, as nanny or cleaner. In Pai's (2008) journalistic account of irregular Chinese migration to the UK, sex work featured as a significant means of survival for many Chinese women without status. Such experiences were poorly represented in the academic literature, likely due to the taboo nature of the topic and the difficulties involved in gaining access to the research field. As detailed in the discussion above, some studies related to the family relationships of undocumented Chinese migrants contained observations about the influence of gender. For example, Chen (2019) found that Chinese

mothers who had left children in China experienced more guilt compared with Chinese fathers. Chen (2019) argued that the emotional difficulties involved in mothering left behind children appeared to be exacerbated for undocumented Chinese women who were more likely to face long separations due to the immobility of their status. They were also more likely to have internalised traditional constructions of motherhood due to their largely rural backgrounds. However, Chen (2019) also found that undocumented Chinese women could experience a sense of liberation from traditional gender expectations if they were able to acquire status and achieve economic and legal stability in the UK. Such insights about the effect of gender on the experience of irregular emigration from China are illuminating. However, overall, gender was not a key focus in the majority of the studies reviewed. The specific experiences of undocumented migrant women from other national and cultural contexts have received more considered analysis in the wider scholarship about irregular migration. For example, undocumented women's experiences of: sexual violence during migration journeys (e.g., Acosta & Morris McEwen, 2022); pregnancy and antenatal and postnatal care (e.g., Munro, Jarvis, Munoz, D'Souza, & Graves, 2013); and migrant mothering (e.g., Straut-Eppsteiner, 2021) have been explored in more depth in the broader body of literature. The studies reviewed in this chapter indicate that Chinese women's experiences are likely to have been shaped by the intersection of gender and an irregular status, yet gender was not a predominant lens of analysis in the literature about undocumented Chinese migration.

### **2.6.2 Methodological approaches to the study of undocumented Chinese migration**

Turning to the methodological approaches in the literature reviewed in this chapter, a key strength is the number of multi-sited studies identified in this review. Several authors conducted

fieldwork in both China and in destination countries and included in their analysis the social, economic and political conditions of both contexts (e.g., Chen, 2019; Pieke et al., 2004; Zhang & Chin, 2002). Fieldwork in China was commonly conducted in Fujian province, a region associated with irregular emigration from China (as noted above). This multi-sited approach lent a balanced quality to the literature and ensured that the role of China on the global stage was incorporated into the analysis of irregular emigration (e.g., the argument advanced by Pieke et al., 2004, in relation to “Chinese Globalisation” as the backdrop to emigration from Fujian to Europe, p.9). This attention to both sending and receiving perspectives perhaps reflects the high proportion of ethnically Chinese authors and co-researchers included in the review. Additionally, the popularity of transnational studies since the 2000s and the influence of Wimmer and Glick Schiller’s (2002) concept of methodological nationalism may have influenced the approach to the study of undocumented Chinese migration. Alongside a strong focus on China as a sending country, the destination countries studied in the literature were varied. Early studies largely focused on Chinese emigration to the US (e.g., Chin, 1999; Smith, 1997; Zhang & Chin, 2002) and were underpinned by the assumption that most emigrants who left China seeking a better life overseas hoped to migrate to America. However, as new Chinese migrant configurations were observed in increasingly diverse locations, the scholarship followed. Europe (e.g. Pieke et al., 2004), and, in particular, the UK (e.g. Pieke & Xiang, 2010), France (Guerassimoff, 2003), Hungary (Nyíri, 2003) and Italy (Ceccagno, 2003), became key sites of scholarship on the topic of both regular and irregular Chinese migration, alongside Japan (Liu-Farrer, 2008) and, perhaps surprisingly, Israel (Li, 2012). In view of the geographic diversity in the literature, some scholars have stressed the importance of national and regional policies in shaping the experience of an irregular status. For example, Thunø and Pieke (2005) argued that migration from Fujian to

Europe was highly specific and dependent on the policies and practices of both sending and receiving regions. The attention paid to the policy and social contexts in both sending and receiving countries in the studies reviewed appears to be aligned with Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) argument that both the conditions of exit and the conditions of reception shaped migrant incorporation.

The predominant approach in the studies reviewed in this chapter was qualitative. Most authors drew on qualitative methods such as: ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Chen, 2019), participant observation (Pieke et al., 2004), and in-depth interviews (Bloch & McKay, 2016). The most commonly cited methods involved direct engagement with undocumented Chinese migrants themselves. Curiously, despite this direct engagement, the perceptions and experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants were rarely at the forefront of the earliest published studies which, as already noted, were focused on the criminal and shocking aspects of Chinese emigration. Journal article titles such as "Enter the dragon" (Zhang & Chin, 2002) and the more recently published "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown" (Silverstone and Whittle, 2016) were perhaps designed to capture the attention of readers. However, arguably, these terms exoticized Chinese migrants and suggested an association with crime and corruption. The effect of these language choices was to distance Chinese migrants from the reader and from their human experiences. The connection between migrants' experience of irregular status and their broader life stories was not a preoccupation of the early scholarship.

A major strength of recent scholarship is the attention to the inner worlds and constructions of undocumented Chinese migrants. Authors such as Chen (2021) and Wang (2021) powerfully captured the emotional worlds and inner lives of their interviewees. Lawthom et al.'s (2013) narrative approach enabled the authors to present migrants' life stories in a way that conveyed a

sense of real people, who were transformed by migration, and forced to negotiate family responsibilities under significant pressure as irregular migrant workers.

Interestingly, the studies reviewed contained limited attention to language. Given the methodological difficulties involved in conducting cross language research, and in translating and presenting Chinese terms and concepts into English, the literature is strangely silent on the topic. Lawthom et al.'s (2013) study of forced labour amongst Chinese workers in the UK was the only example retrieved during the literature search that deployed narrative methods. Surprisingly, the authors omitted any discussion of: participants' use of language; reflection on the process of translating migrants' narratives from Chinese languages into English; or the multiple possible interpretations of Chinese characters used to construct the stories.

Finally, there is a paucity of quantitative research in the sample and in the wider literature relating to undocumented migration. The hidden nature of irregular migration and the connection between enumerating undocumented migrants and migration governance means that populations of undocumented Chinese migrants cannot be accurately mapped for public planning purposes or research sampling.

### **2.6.3 Research gaps and emerging areas of interest**

From my analysis of the predominant themes and the major methodological approaches, I have identified seven gaps in knowledge and emerging areas of interest. Extension of key emerging issues and new methodological approaches are required to further develop understanding of undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences.

- i) The experiences of migrants who shift to an undocumented status, away from the border crossing event, have rarely been examined. The *shift from an*

*irregular to a regular or semi-regular status* has also received limited attention in the literature. Such knowledge gaps leave questions about: how migrants experience shifts in and out of an undocumented status when they are distanced by time from the sending country; and how such shifts affect migrants' life course and the identity they may have established in the destination country.

ii) Many of the studies reviewed in this chapter focused on Chinese migrants' migration journeys and their arrival experiences in the destination country. Yet, studies have shown that Chinese migrants often remained subject to an undocumented status for up to and over a decade (e.g., Bloch & McKay, 2016). Thus, the *long-term* experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants and their *status journey over time* remain under researched.

iii) Given the evidence about Chinese migrants' potentially difficult migration journeys, precarious work lives and complex family and social worlds, it seems intuitive that their *emotional experiences* require examination. Yet, few studies have considered the emotional states of undocumented Chinese migrants as their lives have unfolded (Wang's 2021 study in Paris is a notable exception). Questions about why and how migrants tolerate the hardships of an undocumented life and how they find meaning and purpose remain only partially answered by the literature.

iv) An analysis of the impact of *gender* on Chinese migrants' experiences of an undocumented status is missing from the literature. Gender was not found to be a significant thread in the literature, despite the existence of individual studies with interesting insights about gender in relation to transnational parenting and

work in Chinese restaurants. The experiences that relate specifically to Chinese migrant women, and the way in which gender may intersect with an undocumented status, require further examination.

v) The studies reviewed largely represented the experiences of working-age migrants. Much less is known about the views and experiences of undocumented Chinese children and young people. The ethical challenges involved in accessing undocumented groups may explain why children and young people, who are likely to be vulnerable due to their age and status, were not the focus of any study reviewed (see Sigona & Hughes 2012 for an account of the difficulties involved in engaging Chinese children and young people in research). Undocumented Chinese children and young people remain an under studied and potentially vulnerable group.

vi) There has been limited attention to undocumented Chinese migrants' interactions with institutions, welfare services and professionals. This means that service provision for undocumented Chinese migrants is currently based on limited information. Furthermore, barriers to relationship building between Chinese undocumented migrants and professionals have been under explored.

vii) In terms of methodological approaches, there is scope for further quantitative studies of undocumented Chinese migration to inform public policy. Additionally, greater attention to *language* may help to develop an in depth understanding of how migrants construct their lives and their experiences.

To fulfil the overarching aim of the current study – to explore the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK - I constructed three research questions: how did Chinese migrants experience:

- i) the shift to an undocumented status?;
- ii) everyday life with an undocumented status?; and
- iii) the status journey over time?

Each research question is discussed below to elucidate how they were located within the research gaps identified during the review of existing literature about undocumented Chinese migration.

The first research question was shaped by evidence from the review that migrants who were made subject to an irregular status at a time after the border-crossing event had rarely been considered in the literature. I considered it necessary, therefore, to explore Chinese migrants' experiences of the shift to an undocumented status. The wording of the first research question is intentionally broad to capture the variety of pathways into an undocumented status, each of which may occur at different points in a migrant's life course. The second research question was constructed to fit with the turn to the everyday lives of undocumented migrants identified in the literature (e.g., Bloch et al., 2014). Rather than focusing solely on the migration journey and arrival experiences, which was central to the earliest published studies, the second question was designed to generate original data about the broader experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants, including their employment, education, family lives and social networks in the UK. I intended that the environments in which migrants' spent time would also be captured by attending to their everyday lives. Given the findings in this review about the importance of the Chinese restaurant and takeaway as places in which migrants spent considerable periods of time, I judged that attention to the ethnographic context and social environments within which Chinese

migrants worked and socialised would add depth to the exploration of their experiences of an undocumented status. The third research question is located within the gap in literature related to the long-term experiences and outcomes of Chinese migrants who were subjected to an undocumented status for many years. Insights from the broader migration literature suggest that an irregular status over long periods of time can have a corrosive effect on the mental health of individual migrants (e.g., Khosravi, 2021, pp.202-207). Only limited research has considered the experiences of Chinese migrants over time (e.g., Wang, 2021). Therefore, I considered it necessary to explore the temporal dimension of undocumented Chinese migrants' lives in the UK as they moved in and out of irregular statuses. Additionally, the third research question was intended to shed light on the emotional aspects of an undocumented life which, as discussed above, is an understudied dimension of Chinese migrants' experiences.

In addition to shaping the research aims, the review of literature also highlighted the variety of research methodologies adopted in the existing studies to examine undocumented migration from China and shaped the approach to research design and process in this study. For example, the strengths of ethnographic approaches in allowing researchers to understand migrants' lives in context and through their own experiences were clearly presented in the major ethnographies discussed in this chapter (e.g., Chen, 2019; Pieke et al., 2004; Wang, 2021). These arguments encouraged me to adopt ethnographic principles in my approach to the study, such as a commitment to spending time in the field and the development of research relationships with potential participants and gatekeepers. The finding that there was only limited attention paid to language, and only one example of narrative research identified during the literature review (Lawthom et al., 2013) shaped my decision to adopt a narrative inquiry approach. Such an approach allowed for the language and narrative techniques that participants used to tell their

migration stories to occupy a central position in my analysis of Chinese migrants' experiences. Additionally, the limited attention paid to the experiences of Chinese women in the existing literature influenced the recruitment strategy and the intention to examine gender in relation to the research questions. A more detailed account of the methodological choices made in relation to this project is provided in chapter three.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented the existing literature in relation to undocumented Chinese migration. In doing so, I have outlined the predominant thematic focus on the motivations of emigrants and the means and methods of irregular emigration in the early literature published in the aftermath of tragic events. Additionally, I have presented the more recent move in the literature to examine the everyday lives and the emotional and social worlds of Chinese migrants subjected to various irregular statuses. Debates about the importance of snakeheads, the role of migrant agency, migrants' willingness to tolerate poor working conditions and the role of family relationships and social networks, have been discussed. I have then outlined seven research gaps and emerging areas of interest identified from the literature and described how such gaps shaped the research aim and questions. In the next chapter, I build on the discussion of the existing approaches to the study of irregular Chinese migration in this chapter by outlining my methodological approach to the study and the fit with the research aim of this thesis.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I introduce the methodological approach that I have taken to the study of undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences, as guided by insights from the review of literature. The aim of this chapter is to outline how the research design fits with the aims of this thesis and to provide an account of the research process. To achieve this, I first present my methodological orientation to the study, grounded in Dewey's (1997) pragmatic theory of experience and guided by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) model of narrative inquiry. Then, I describe the research process which includes a discussion of: the pilot study; the sites of the study; the approach to access and recruitment; participant characteristics; and the narrative interviews conducted. Next, I outline my approach to narrative analysis. Finally, I discuss the ethical and epistemological tensions involved in conducting a narrative inquiry in which I sought to explore the experiences of a group to which I was an 'outsider'.

### **3.2 Methodological orientation**

As outlined in chapter one, the overarching aim of this study was to explore the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. To fulfil this aim, I constructed three research questions: how did Chinese migrants experience:

- i) the shift to an undocumented status?;
- ii) everyday life with an undocumented status?; and
- iii) the status journey over time?

The centrality of migrant experience in the research aims meant that, from an early stage in the project, I judged that a qualitative approach, with an interpretivist orientation, would be appropriate. I also needed to select a research design which offered access to experiences to which I was an outsider – experiences which took place in times and places to which I had little other access. The insights from the review of literature presented in chapter two influenced my decision about which methodological approach to adopt to fulfil the research aims. As discussed in chapter two, limited attention was paid in the existing scholarship to the language and narrative techniques that migrants used to construct their experiences of an undocumented status (Lawthom et al., 2013, was the only exception found). In a cross-language study, such as this, in which I sought to explore the personal experiences and inner worlds of a group to which I was external, I judged that a close examination of migrants’ use of language would ground the study in the experience as lived and told by participants. Another consideration was that I needed an approach that allowed for the development of rapport and trust with potential participants who I anticipated, due to their ‘illegal’ status, would be reluctant to take part in research. In the existing literature, ethnographic research methods were adopted by prominent scholars of irregular Chinese migration to overcome barriers to research access caused by trust (see, for example, Chen, 2019; Pieke et al., 2004 and Wang, 2021). Therefore, influenced by the research aims, my position as an ‘outsider’ in relation to potential participants, and insights from the review of literature, I adopted a narrative inquiry approach, underpinned by ethnographic principles, as the guiding methodology for the study. In the discussion that follows, I set out why I adopted a narrative approach, the theoretical orientation to narrative inquiry deployed and how I approached the limitations of narrative inquiry by adopting key principles of ethnographic research.

### 3.2.1 A narrative inquiry approach to the study of migrant experience

Human beings, for as long as we have had language, have told stories about our lives: telling stories is one of the ways we have created meaning and built relationships and communities with others (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019). Therefore, the human urge to tell and retell stories about our lives means that narratives are an appropriate, and widely used, medium through which to study human experience. Narrative inquiry, then, “the study of experience as story” is a research methodology committed to the study of human experience (Clandinin, 2006, p.375). Given the primary focus on undocumented Chinese migrants’ *experiences* in this study, and the aim to explore the affective dimensions of being subjected to an irregular status, narrative inquiry was an appropriate approach.

The decision to adopt a narrative approach in this study was also influenced by the prominence of narrative methods and attention to language in the broader literature related to irregular migration. For example: De Fina and King (2011) examined the *language-related experiences* of undocumented Latin Americans in the US; Batzke (2018) analysed the *self-representations* of undocumented migrants in the US through various narrative forms; and Gonzales (2011) conceptualised the shift to an undocumented status as “learning to be illegal” by exploring 1.5-generation undocumented Latino young people’s life *stories* in Southern California (p.602). Telling personal stories was a defining method of resistance for the Dreamers in the US who succeeded in bringing change to immigration laws by creating and sharing compelling narratives about their experiences of growing up into an undocumented status (De Fina, 2020). By working with migrants’ stories about their experiences, I extend the narrative tradition in the study of undocumented migration.

### ***Theoretical orientation: sociality, temporality and place***

Experience has been observed through many different philosophical lenses. The findings of the review of literature discussed in the previous chapter provided insights into the nature of undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences and the state of knowledge about such experiences. I found that: migrants' social and family *relationships* were of central importance to their motivations to migrate and their willingness to tolerate poor working conditions; the *places* within which migrants spent their time ordered their daily lives; and, Chinese migrants' experiences of an undocumented status over *time* was an understudied issue. Therefore, I selected an approach to the ontology of experience that included a consideration of *relationships, place and time*: American philosopher John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy of experience. In Dewey's philosophy, reality is temporal and processual: there is no eternal truth and inquiry is the process through which we make sense of our worlds through concrete experience (Russell, 2013). Experience, for Dewey, was grounded in a world of "persons" and "things", and it was not something which occurred "exclusively in an individual's body and mind" (Dewey, 1997, pp.39-40). Dewey argued that experience has two criteria: interaction and continuity (Dewey, 1997). Connelly and his student, Clandinin, who developed narrative inquiry as a research methodology for higher education scholarship in the 1990s, drew heavily on Dewey's pragmatic philosophy of experience. On interaction, Clandinin and Connelly explained that "People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.2). Based on this premise, narrative inquiry, as developed by Clandinin and Connelly, is grounded in an analysis of people *in relation* to others and to their *social context* which includes physical place. On continuity, they wrote:

experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum - the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future – each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future.

(p. 2)

This construction of experience as characterised by continuity recognises the temporal aspect of human experience. From Dewey's two criteria of experience, Clandinin and Connelly developed a three-dimensional model of narrative inquiry which included: i) sociality; ii) temporality; and iii) place which, they argued, are the commonplaces of narrative inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly's model, grounded in Dewey's philosophical writing, is a good fit with this study because all three dimensions of the model have a clear application to the study of migration and to the research questions that guided this inquiry. First, the sociality of the migration experience has been well established in previous studies: migration is both an individual journey and part of a family, community and often a national or diasporic story. In the case of emigration from China, traditions of migration from certain regions have been sustained through the exchange of stories about migrant success overseas and a shared sense of identity as explorers (see, for example, Pieke et al., 2004, on transnational Fujianese migration). My first and second research questions which related to Chinese migrants' shift to an undocumented status and their everyday lives with an undocumented status, were impossible to explore without a consideration of the social relationships and contexts of participants. Second, Clandinin and Connelly's inclusion of temporality as a key focus of analysis provided a means through which to examine how migration stories unfolded over time. The centrality of time in this study is evident in the third research question – how did Chinese migrants experience the status journey

over time? Migrants' subjective experiences of time and the time constraints placed upon them by both the immigration system and the structure of the Chinese ethnic economy became key points of analysis in this study. Third, Clandinin and Connelly's attention to place also works well in the study of migrants' experience in which processes of displacement, disorientation and relocation were central. Connections between the sending country, the receiving country, and the concrete social places in which migrant lives were lived are often fundamental to migrant sense-making and the construction of personal and cultural identity (Gomez-Estern & Benitas, 2013). Given the synergy between the nature of Chinese migrants' experiences as outlined in the existing literature, the research questions and Clandinin and Connelly's ontological approach to narrative inquiry, I followed their three-dimensional model in this study. This meant that sociality, temporality and place were key touchstones in the analysis of the narratives in this study.

### ***Ethical considerations in the adoption of a narrative inquiry approach***

An ethical issue that was a consideration in the selection of a research method for this study of undocumented migration was how to avoid becoming complicit with the negative framing to which undocumented migrants are subjected. Undocumented migrants are undoubtedly subjected to injurious master narratives in which they are constructed as illegal, undeserving and a burden on national resources (see Negron-Gonzales's 2013 study in the US, Vollmer's 2011 study in Europe and Brouwer, Van der Woude, & Van der Leun's 2017 study in the Netherlands). As I suggested in chapter one, Chinese undocumented migrants are subjected to additional and contradictory discourses which relate to the Chinese diaspora more generally: they are often treated as a homogenous group, at once celebrated as quiet, self-sufficient, and hard-working

and, simultaneously, denigrated as criminal and subject to co-ethnic exploitation (see Knowles, 2017 and Zhou & Bankston, 2020). Given that my disciplinary background is in social work, it is important to note that Chinese migrants are also underrepresented in social work research and in research on minority groups more broadly. This means that their stories are likely to go unheard (exceptions include Niu, Mcsherry & Partridge, 2021, Yeung, Partridge & Irvine, 2016 and Tang, 2017). The potential for narrative methods to bring attention to the particular stories of undocumented Chinese migrants formed part of the rationale for the choice of narrative methodologies.

### **3.2.2 Narrative inquiry underpinned by ethnographic sensitivities and sensibilities**

Whilst the benefits of narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology for this study are numerous, a criticism often directed at narrative methods is the focus on the micro level experiences of individual participants at the expense of meso and macro context. Such meso and macro factors can shape experiences and (according to Marxists and post-structuralists) may obscure the workings of wider forces in the lives of individuals (see Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, for a discussion of the tensions and synergies between narrative inquiry and other philosophical traditions). The omission of the meso and macro context in this study would be problematic: the role of government policy in creating the various categories of legal and illegal migration statuses has long been emphasised by prominent scholars in the field of undocumented migration (see Gonzales, Sigona, Franco & Papoutsi, 2019, pp.29-31). A related criticism of narrative research is the potential for researchers to produce decontextualised accounts of individuals, which omit consideration of the environment in which narratives were created. Gubrium and Holstein (2008) argued: “Narratives are not simply reflections of experience...Rather, narratives

comprise the interplay between experience, storying practices, descriptive resources, purposes at hand, audiences, and the environments that condition storytelling” (p.251). In other words, narratives do not provide direct access to human experience as lived, but rather they are shaped by the narrative environments in which they are created which, in research, include the participants’ cultural and material background, the relationship between the participant and the researcher, and the environment, both physical and social, within which research takes place. During the shift from *narrative as told* to *narrative as text*, the cultural background and assumptions of both the researcher and the research audience add additional layers of interpretation to the human experience under examination. In this study, my own cultural, linguistic and disciplinary background met with the varied backgrounds of the research participants (who spoke different first languages and had migrated from different regional and cultural traditions) in particular places, at particular times. Therefore, a failure to take account of the narrative environment in which the narratives were created would reflect only part of the research puzzle.

Narrative inquiries have addressed such criticisms. For example, the orientation towards context in Clandinin and Connelly’s model of narrative inquiry encourages inquirers to consider the multiple contexts within which narratives are produced, including the interactions between researcher and research participants in the co-construction of stories (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Squire (2013) argued that, to address the problems of decontextualised narratives of experience, researchers can adopt a socio-culturally-oriented approach (exemplified in Squire’s work on HIV positive people’s narratives of the epidemic in South Africa, 2007). Although much narrative research has moved towards the context-sensitive approach that Squire advocated, there are other

methodological traditions in which the importance of social and cultural context in the development of knowledge has long been emphasised: one such methodology is ethnography.

Ethnography does not lend itself to a simple description, but most scholars agree it involves: a commitment to developing relationships with participants over time, a process of displacement in which the researcher positions herself in the social places in which people typically interact, a commitment to understanding human experience (Behar & Gordon, 1995) and a reflexive endeavour to find balance between insider (participant) and outsider (researcher) perspectives (see, for example, Madden, 2017). These characteristics are well suited to this study of migrants' experiences of undocumented status because the relational approach allowed for the development of trust between undocumented participants and researchers which can develop in the everyday places in which migrants interact (well-known examples include Menjivar, 2006 and Gonzales, 2015 in the US context). Ethnography also shares some ethical and epistemological assumptions with professional social work. For example, the focus in ethnography on the subjective experiences of participants resonates with the respect and curiosity with which social workers approach experts by experience. This was one reason, amongst others, why Gillingham and Smith (2020) described ethnography and social work as “epistemological siblings” (p.1). Given the common ground between social work and ethnography and the history of ethnographic scholarship in the study of undocumented migration, I drew on ethnographic principles (such as time in the field, attention to ethnographic context, and curiosity about migrants' subjective understandings) in this inquiry into Chinese migrants' experiences. I therefore describe this study as a narrative inquiry underpinned by ethnographic sensitivities and sensibilities.

### **3.3 The research process**

In the following section of the chapter, I outline and justify the specific research process followed when I conducted fieldwork between January and August 2017. The process involved an initial pilot study, followed by mostly one-to-one narrative interviews with 13 undocumented Chinese migrants, conducted with the support of a bilingual Research Assistant.

#### **3.3.1 Beginnings: the pilot study**

Narrative inquiry in cross cultural and cross-language research contexts creates both practical and epistemological challenges. These challenges were articulated concisely in Andrews' (2007) exploration of cross-cultural boundaries in narrative inquiry: "How is it that we access, interpret, and analyse stories that, at their heart, are distant from experiences that we ourselves may have encountered?" (p.489). Andrews' words resonated with the key issues that I sought to explore in the early stages of the study. First, how and where would I 'access' Chinese migrants who had both experienced undocumented status and who would be willing to share their experiences? Second, how would I manage the interpretation of narrative accounts which would be constructed in a cross-language context? Third, in what type of narrative inquiry would potential participants be comfortable taking part? A related question is how would the research design generate sufficient depth of data to answer the research questions? To explore these issues in practice, I undertook a pilot study two months prior to the commencement of the main study (November to December 2016).

The pilot study consisted of: formal and informal discussions with Chinese community workers and academic colleagues with shared research interests; semi-structured interviews with three Chinese migrants; and an opportunity to test a cross-language interview conducted in

Putonghua with interpretation provided by a Research Assistant. The discussions with Chinese colleagues during the pilot stage indicated that community centres and Chinese churches in Greater Manchester (an area in which I had existing professional ties with Chinese organisations) would be appropriate sites for recruitment. The pilot study also provided the opportunity to test out my working relationship with the Research Assistant employed to support communication during research interviews conducted in Putonghua and to test the process of transcription and translation (conducted by a professional service in China)<sup>1</sup>.

The Research Assistant, Jo, (a pseudonym) was a Chinese PhD candidate at Keele University. Although Jo did not hold specialist credentials as an interpreter, her first language was Putonghua, and she had an appropriate grasp of English to interpret key words and phrases in English. Jo was previously employed by a multinational company in which English was the language spoken for work purposes. In line with Squires' (2009) recommended measures of trustworthiness for qualitative cross-language research, Jo and I worked to address conceptual equivalence for the pilot interview questions. Jo checked my translation of the interview topic guide (contained in appendix D), and we discussed the appropriate translations for key terms. The topic guide was also checked by a bilingual Chinese language tutor at the university who was not directly involved in data collection to enhance the trustworthiness of the translation. An example of our approach to the translation of key terms relates to the term 'social worker'. 'Social worker' can be translated directly into Putonghua – '社工' or '社会工作者' - but the term is not well known which likely reflects the uneven development of social work in mainland China

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<sup>1</sup> As an intermediate Chinese speaker, I led all research interviews conducted in Putonghua. When I did not understand a phrase or section of a participant's narrative, Jo interpreted the phrase and described the narrative to me in English. Please refer to appendix C for an outline of the researcher / research assistant roles during interviews and the confidentiality agreement signed by the Research Assistant.

(Leung & Xu, 2015), despite the Chinese government's goal to train a workforce of 1.4 million social workers before the end of 2020 (Höjer, Chen, Hämäläinen, Lei, Shardlow, & Fang, 2022).

During a pilot interview with Xiao Jie (小姐), an undocumented Chinese Malaysian woman, Jo and I realised that the term '社工' had no meaning for the participant. Xiao Jie conflated 'social work' with 'voluntary work', which, in Putonghua, is '义工'. We subsequently developed a short introduction to an interview question about participants' experiences of social work in which Jo took several minutes to explain the role and the equivalence in China. This preparation proved to be useful as the same misunderstanding occurred in all subsequent interviews in the main study (with the exception of Feng Mian who had experienced involvement from social services in relation to her son).

After the three pilot interviews, I sent the audio recordings to the transcription service and requested that the transcript contained both Chinese characters and English translations side-by-side. I then checked the transcription and translation for accuracy by simultaneously reading the transcripts whilst listening to the audio recordings. I made minor amendments to the translated transcript to better reflect in English the idiomatic quality and force of utterance of the original Chinese. This method of enhancing the validity of the translations, tested during the pilot study, was repeated with all eight interviews conducted in Putonghua in the main study.

Another benefit of conducting a pilot study was the opportunity to test and amend the research design. As discussed in chapter one, I originally intended to conduct a visual narrative inquiry with the use of photo-elicitation which I hoped would serve three purposes: to encourage participants to express aspects of their experiences which may be difficult to articulate with words only (Bagnoli, 2009; Harper, 2002); to open for exploration the unseen places and

everyday encounters of undocumented migrants; and to develop the ‘narrative imagination’ of myself and the audiences of the research who may never have experienced an irregular legal status (Brockmeier, 2009). However, it became clear during the pilot study that participants were uncomfortable with the idea of taking photographs to be shared in a research interview and struggled to understand what they may photograph and for what purpose. Xiao Jie, who had been eager to participate in a pilot interview and had, during the interview, leaned over the audio recorder to ensure it picked up her voice, politely dismissed the invitation to take part in a second photo-elicitation interview. The request for visual data perhaps felt too intrusive. Based on the reactions of participants during the pilot stage, I amended the research design to focus on verbal narratives.

### **3.3.2 Narrative environments: the sites of the study**

Conducting a narrative inquiry involved entering the life worlds of participants. This included both the physical environments in which participants spent time and the places, both real and imagined, past and future, constructed through participants’ storytelling. As already noted, the inquiry was conducted in Greater Manchester. In Manchester, I spent time at two primary sites: a Chinese community centre and a Chinese Christian church. Key characteristics of these sites – Chinese languages were spoken, they were both accessed by Chinese migrants who had experienced different categories of migration statuses, they were independent from government, they were established as organisations which provided support for migrants, and the church had strong ties with Fujian, a region in China associated with irregular emigration (see Thunø & Pieke, 2005) – made them appropriate places to develop relationships with undocumented Chinese migrants. I joined in the social life of these two places by volunteering as

an English tutor at the community centre and attending the church as a member of the congregation. The church served a large and heterogeneous congregation of Chinese members and offered services in both Cantonese and Putonghua. I attended the weekly Putonghua Sunday service, took part in the after-service fellowship over social conversations and green tea, and joined a Fujianese bible study group which met weekly in another church building in the Northern Quarter of Manchester city. Formal interviews and informal conversations with Chinese migrants mostly took place in the back room of the church after services and in private rooms at the community centre. One interview took place at a participant's Chinese restaurant, and one took place by telephone, both at participants' request.

The narrative environments of this study also moved beyond the physical places in which conversations and interviews took place. Whilst talking together in back rooms, I travelled metaphorically with participants, through their narrative accounts, from rural Fujian, metropolitan Shanghai, industrial Tianjin, on migratory detours to urban centres in mainland China, overseas to the US, South America and, to their current homes in the UK. Certain places, such as overcrowded dormitories in which migrants had lived on arrival in the UK, the hot and greasy kitchens of Chinese restaurants and takeaways, and the sanctuary of the Chinese church, were vividly described with such regularity that they became shared sites constructed across the storied lives of narrators. The political contexts of each narrative site also shaped migrants' stories. For example, Yu Yan's reflections on her first experience of motherhood in rural Fujian cannot be understood without an appreciation of the context of China's One Child Policy, its implementation by local officials in rural China and the interaction with China's household registration system (discussed in chapters five and seven). The timeframes in which I conducted fieldwork (January – August 2017) meant that narratives were also influenced by the

increasingly stringent immigration policies enacted in England as part of the ‘hostile environment’ and the general hardening of attitudes towards migrants in the lead up to and aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

### **3.3.3 Developing research relationships: access and recruitment**

In a narrative inquiry, standard research terms derived from the social sciences, such as ‘participant recruitment’ and ‘access’, are often replaced with concepts that reflect a relational orientation to negotiating the researcher’s position in the field. Connelly and Clandinin, in their seminal 1990 text, used concepts such as “negotiation of a shared narrative unity” (p.3) and “the mutual construction of the research relationship” (p.4) to describe the conditions under which a researcher gains entry to an inquiry. The investment of time and the commitment to building relationships in narrative inquiry also speaks to the ethnographic tradition of ‘immersion in the field’. I drew upon this relational orientation to develop relationships with gatekeepers and potential participants in my inquiry. The two primary barriers to recruitment in research with undocumented migrants have been well established in existing studies: first, “migration status has no visible marker” and, therefore, identifying potential participants is difficult (Düvell, Triandafyllidou & Vollmer, 2010, p.233); and, second, undocumented migrants may actively conceal their irregular status to avoid detention and deportation (Figuro, 2016). It is perhaps unsurprising that the strength of the research relationships was central to overcoming these barriers and to the quality and depth of the narratives that were created during the study.

I first approached multiple gatekeepers in Greater Manchester, including a Chinese social worker, a board member of a Chinese community centre, a Chinese pastor, a GP employed by a Chinese health centre and the director of a Chinese culture and language centre. As a previous

employee and volunteer at a Chinese community centre in the area, I had existing relationships with many of the gatekeepers and I developed relationships with others (such as the Chinese pastor and other leaders in the Chinese church) through introductions. My existing relationships helped me to demonstrate trustworthiness and to make a case for how the study would positively benefit participants (both prerequisites of successful relationships with gatekeepers in research with irregular migrants, according to Düvell et al., 2010). After I was introduced to potential participants by gatekeepers, I used snowball sampling, a strategy in which a series of initial contacts are made and further introductions to the networks of initial contacts generate potential participants. Snowball sampling is a frequently used strategy in research with undocumented migrants (see, for example Bloch, Sigona, & Zetter, 2009, and Gonzales, 2015). Through this approach, 12 Chinese migrants who had experienced an irregular status were recruited to the study. In addition to my strategy of building research relationships, I also attempted to contact potential participants by posting invitations to participate in the study at various venues around Manchester's Chinatown, including Chinese restaurants, shops, supermarkets, and a large casino. I also advertised the study on BBC Manchester Radio's Chinatown programme to invite interested individuals to make contact. Furthermore, I visited English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teaching centres with large numbers of Chinese students and left invitations for the consideration of Chinese learners. These strategies resulted in the recruitment of just one participant.

The success of the strategies used to recruit potential participants depended largely on the strength of relationships between participants and myself, and between participants, gatekeepers, and myself. Where I had developed relationships, either through previous employment, voluntary work, introductions by trusted gatekeepers or time spent in the field, I generated the most

potential participants. My attempts to promote the study in contexts in which I had no existing relationships were less successful. The importance of trust and the critical role of gatekeepers and intermediaries in the recruitment process for this study resonated with the methodological accounts provided by other researchers in the field (see, for example, Bloch, Sigona, & Zetter, 2009 and Gonzales, 2015).

The number of interviewees in this study was determined by an adaptive approach which unfolded during the research process. As Sim, Saunders, Waterfield and Kingstone (2018) argued, “defining sample size a priori is inherently problematic in the case of inductive, exploratory research, which, by definition, looks to explore phenomena in relation to which we cannot identify the key themes in advance” (p.630). Given the exploratory, interpretivist nature of this inquiry, the analysis I undertook during fieldwork was integral to the judgement made about how many participants were sufficient to develop a meaningful picture of the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants. Whilst conducting the interviews, I began preliminary analysis of the data set, and found a series of reoccurring story types, narrative themes and linguistic techniques used by participants to craft their migration stories. Based on this preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts, I was confident that the quality, depth and richness of the data was theoretically sufficient to construct meaning. Therefore, I made a pragmatic decision, in consultation with the supervisory team, to cease the search for new potential participants through snowball methods. However, it is possible that, if I had recruited participants with different backgrounds who, for example, had worked in different sectors in the UK economy or had migrated from different regions in China, I would likely have encountered different narratives about the experience of an undocumented status.

### **3.3.4 Participant characteristics**

In total, thirteen Chinese migrants participated in the study. All participants had experienced an irregular migration status since their migration to the UK: eight participants were subject to an irregular status at the time of their interview and five had secured permanent residence in the UK. Most participants (12) had migrated from the People's Republic of China (six migrants were from Fujian, four from Guangdong, one from Tianjin and one from Shanghai) and one participant had migrated from the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. Although attempts were made to recruit an equal balance of women and men, nine participants were female and four were male. This reflected the working patterns of Chinese migrant men who were often required to work six days per week with little time for leisure, church fellowship or English language tuition. Two participants were in full time education at the time of their interviews, and the other eleven participants were either in employment or they had caring responsibilities. Ages ranged from 18 to 60 and length of time in the UK varied from six months to 15 years. All six Fujianese participants' first language was a dialect of Hakka (客家, a language group spoken throughout Southern China and Taiwan). Five participants' first language was Cantonese, and two participants spoke regional dialects of Putonghua. All participants were able to communicate in either Putonghua or English with fluency for the purpose of the study. A summary of participants' characteristics is contained in Table 1.

### **3.3.5 Narrative interviews**

Interviews and conversation are the most commonly used methods of data collection in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interviews represent the commitment of time (both the participant's and the researchers') to the telling of stories. I used interviews to elicit participants' stories about their migration journeys which, alongside my field notes, became the main unit of analysis in this study. In this section, I provide an account of how the interviews were constructed. The purpose of this account is not replicability: in this study, the type of knowledge generated was narrative in nature and had a temporal quality which was grounded in specific places and contexts, and dealt with human behaviour, intention and sense-making and was, therefore, irreplicable. Here, I aim to enhance transparency through a reflexive discussion of three key issues: the practical arrangements of the interviews; the choice of languages used during interviews, and the content of the interviews.

#### ***The practical arrangements of the interviews***

Aspects of the practical arrangements of the interviews were subject to change in the field based on participant's preferences, my desire to honour those preferences, and the influence of the interview site. For example, I planned to conduct interviews one-to-one or two-to-one (when interpretation was required). This was perhaps a product of my cultural lens in which I conceived of autobiographical stories as narrated by an autonomous self as protagonist. However, as Wang and Brockmeier (2002) argued, some cultures, including Chinese and other Asian cultures, demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to the self *in relation* to others when reconstructing their own lives through narrative. This may account for some participants' preference to be interviewed with family members or friends. For example, Wang (王) and Meng (梦), husband

and wife, asked to be interviewed together following an English class at the Chinese community centre in which Meng had participated. I agreed as I wanted to demonstrate ‘客气’, a Chinese concept that relates to the behaviour of a guest towards their host and invokes concepts of humility and politeness. I hoped that such humility would cultivate an environment conducive to the exchange of in-depth narratives. I asked Wang and Meng to tell their stories in turn, but, instead, their narratives weaved in and out of their individual and collective perspectives and rang with sorrow and empathy for the hardships each had experienced.

Another example of changes to the practical arrangements of interviews related to timing. I planned for interviews to last between 45 minutes to one hour (the mean duration of interviews was 56 minutes). However, during interviews conducted in the church, participants’ roles as mothers and spouses often affected the length of time they were able to participate. Feng Mian’s interview, which took place after a Sunday service during fellowship at the Chinese church, was the shortest interview by far at just ten minutes long. Whilst taking part in the interview, Feng Mian also managed the behaviour of her son who had a learning difficulty. At one point, he picked up one of the audio recorders and attempted to take the device apart. Although the interview was cut short, the interruptions provided the opportunity to observe Feng Mian’s struggle to manage her son’s behaviour and added both strength and poignancy to the account of her experiences as a migrant mother with limited support. These issues became key themes in the analysis of her narrative.

### *The choice of languages used during interviews*

Although participants were from varied linguistic backgrounds, I offered a choice of participating in interviews in either Putonghua or English. This meant that, for some participants,

interviews were conducted in a language other than their first language or dialect. This choice was based on both ethical and epistemological considerations. Ethically, the decision to work with just one dual language Research Assistant rather than multiple interpreters limited the number of people with access to participants' personal data. Epistemologically, I chose to use either English or Putonghua so that I could respond to the narratives told during the interviews. In both languages, I could clarify aspects of participants' stories, inquire further into details of the narratives, and begin preliminary analysis during and immediately after interviews. If interviews were conducted in Hakka, for example, I would not have been able to respond to the stories told in vivo. In total, five interviews were conducted in English and eight interviews were conducted in Putonghua with the support of the Research Assistant. During interviews conducted in English, code switching between English and Chinese was common and reflected differences between participants' everyday language and the language used to describe their legal status (see, for example, Sarah's story in chapter four).

### *The content of the interviews*

Interviews were semi-structured and designed to create an opportunity for participants to tell their stories. I initially asked demographic information as a warm-up and then asked the key question: "Can you tell me your story of migrating to the UK?" For some participants, the warm-up questions were enough to prompt detailed narratives about their migration journeys. For participants who gave shorter responses, I then used a list of pre-prepared topics framed as open questions to elicit greater depth and detail (see appendix D). In response, participants mostly told their stories in chronological order, but they recounted sub stories in which the past, present and

future were connected through poignant and memorable experiences. Accounts of loss, of constrained agency, of endless waiting and of uncertain futures imbued the narratives.

### **3.4 Interpreting the narratives: Approach to analysis**

Narrative inquirers take a variety of approaches to the interpretation and analysis of the stories of research participants. Inspired by Kim's (2015) recommendation to "flirt" with different modes of narrative analysis to make meaning (p.184), I drew on the following key ideas to bring participants' experiences of undocumented status to the fore in meaningful ways: Polkinghorne's (1995) theoretical distinction between paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry and narrative-type narrative inquiry; Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) concepts of broadening, burrowing and storying and restorying; and Labov and Waletzky's (1967) model of personal narrative. In the discussion that follows, I sketch out the four phases of analysis that I worked through to incorporate these different paradigms and techniques: constructing narrative patterns and themes, crafting the narratives, broadening and burrowing in the three commonplaces, and telling and retelling the narratives. However, the distinction between the four phases is artificial. In this narrative inquiry, as in much qualitative research, analysis was an iterative process that unfolded over time and involved transitions to and from the field, from field texts to research texts and to various audiences.

#### **3.4.1 Phase one: Constructing narrative patterns and themes**

In the early stages of my attempts to make sense of participants' narratives, I drew on Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic mode of analysis which involved looking for common

categories across the set of narratives. I focused on typical story types, similar plot moves and narrative threads, common themes, and salient affective expressions by participants. Examples of story types included the stories of: an irregular arrival, a shift to an undocumented status and navigating a quasi-legal status, such as a temporary work visa. When constructing patterns and themes across the narratives, I was guided by both the three research questions which were the foci of the study, and I constructed new categories which were inductively drawn from the data. Early categories included: pre-migratory lives; employment; education; social lives; help seeking and support; language needs; and experience of social work. In response to the data collected, I added faith; position in the family /family responsibility; arrival experiences; and experiences of waiting which were reoccurring reference points across many of the narratives. The category of work became increasingly specific to reflect the commonalities in migrants' descriptions of the hierarchical and exploitative operation of Chinese restaurants and takeaways. I organised early iterations of research texts thematically, and I illustrated key themes with chunks of narrative data drawn from across the set of narratives.

### **3.4.2 Phase two: Crafting the narratives**

In the second phase of analysis, I drew on Polkinghorne's narrative mode of analysis which entailed a close focus on the characteristics of each narrative. It involved crafting the interview transcripts into coherent narratives, temporally ordered, which represented the human experience at the centre of the study and maintained the "metaphoric richness" of the original (Kim, 2015, p.197). The aim of Polkinghorne's narrative mode of analysis is to fashion a story which "appeal[s] to readers in a way that helps them empathize with the protagonist's lived experience

as understandable human phenomena” (Kim, 2015, p.197). To construct each narrative, I worked through two steps, as follows.

*Step one:* I first listened to the audio recordings of interviews whilst reading the transcripts (in their original language) to identify storied sections of interviews. I identified stories contained within the narratives that were both: relevant to the research questions; and, appeared particularly salient to participants’ overall experience due to participants’ tone and force of utterance.

*Step two:* I then joined together sections of transcripts to represent stories which both typified and complicated responses to each research question. I kept notes about the connection between the stories I had crafted and the whole narratives as represented by both the original interview transcripts and my field texts based on observations and impressions in the field.

### **3.4.3 Phase three: Broadening and burrowing in the three commonplaces**

During phase three of analysis, I drew most explicitly on Clandinin and Connelly’s model of narrative inquiry (sociality, temporality and place) and their narrative analysis techniques. In their 2000 book on narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly suggested that analysis can be approached through three techniques; broadening, burrowing and storying and restorying, each of which can assist a researcher to examine the dimensions of time, place and sociality in narratives from different standpoints:

- i) Broadening means to consider the narrative in the context of what else is known about the individual’s life and context.
- ii) Burrowing refers to an examination of the details of the experience from the participants’ point of view.

iii) Storying and restorying means to retell a story which brings the significance of the experience to the fore.

In phase three, I focused on broadening and burrowing (as storying and restorying were conducted in phase two, above, and phase four, discussed below) to examine the three commonplaces in the narratives.

Broadening involved a consideration of the wider socio-cultural contexts of participants' lives in both China and in the UK, informed by both their narratives and by the wider literature. I identified cultural discourses in migrants' stories about emigration from China to make money, which influenced motivations to migrate and were a source of disappointment when migrants' expectations jolted against the reality of an undocumented life in the UK. I also examined the intersection of participants' identity and background (such as gender, social class, regional identity, level of education, work experience and language skills) with their experiences of undocumented status. The structure of the co-ethnic economy, the specific spatial and temporal realities of the Chinese restaurant and takeaway and how these shaped migrants' experiences also became key threads in the analysis. In addition, I explored the cultural worldviews expressed through language. For example, attitudes towards 'the British', which appeared to be rooted in historical relationships between the UK and China, are examined in chapter five. I also examined participants' implicit references to cultural concepts such as filial piety (孝), face (面子) and guanxi (关系).

Having examined the broad social and cultural contexts of the narratives, I began burrowing which involved an examination of the experience of undocumented status from participants' points of view. For example, I attended to the repeated expressions of suffering which came to

characterise participants' constructions of an undocumented life. Drawing on sociality, I paid attention to the protagonist in each narrative and the relationship with other characters, including family members, fellow villagers, employers and colleagues. Alongside the characters in narrators' immediate social milieu, I also identified the "ghostly audiences" (Langellier, 1999, p.444) to whom participants implicitly addressed, such as: immigration officials; hometown friends and family; and 'the British'. These ghostly audiences became reference points against which participants constructed a moral framing of their migration journeys. I also paid particular attention to participants' use of language and looked carefully at the connotations of certain words, characters, and utterances in both Chinese and English. I examined, for example: the connotations of terms used to describe irregular status; the contrast between the use of concrete nouns to describe physical places and the use of figurative language, such as images of light and dark, and Chinese idioms to describe emotional states. The aim of this attention to language was to develop a useful description of the impact of undocumented status on participants' migration journeys and on their inner lives.

During the burrowing phase of analysis, I also attended to time and place, key components of Clandinin and Connelly's model of narrative inquiry. I examined participants' subjective experiences of waiting, temporal disruptions in the life course, and the sense of being suspended in the present and unable to imagine the future. I examined changes over time in narrators' motivations for their migration projects, their self-representations, their relationships and their orientation toward the future. I also explored participants' evocation of place: the disorientation associated with unfamiliar places when migrants were newly arrived; the contrasts drawn between China and the UK; the physical and emotional impact of workplaces; the disgust conveyed in relation to overcrowded living spaces; and the sense of belonging evoked by the

Chinese church. An examination of participants' subjective experiences of time and their affective responses to different places helped to deepen my understanding of the experience of undocumented status.

Burrowing also involved attention to the structure of the narratives and the overall plot and sub-plots. I drew inspiration from sociolinguists Labov and Waletzky's 1967 model of personal narrative. The model included: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution and coda (Riessman, 2008, p.84). Although I adopted a broader definition of narrative in which stories are neither fixed nor absolute, as Labov and Waletzky's framework may suggest, I made use of the model to explore the point of the stories, which was not always explicitly expressed. I paid particular attention to the complicating action which, in most narratives, was the point at which migrants shifted to an irregular migration status. Narrators' evaluations of this turning point helped to explore their attitudes toward changes in their migration status and the sense they made of the change. In line with the model, some narratives had reached a resolution in which legal status had been acquired, but for those migrants who remained subject to irregular and temporary statuses, the resolution to their complicating action was either non-existent or unsatisfying. For narrators without a clear resolution to their migration narratives, who remained in limbo at the time of their interviews, I paid attention to the attitudes expressed in their codas in which they brought the story back to the present day. Other divergences from Labov and Waletzky's model provided points of reflection on migrants' experience. For example, I analysed the fragmentation of certain sub plots in which discontinuities and non-linear accounts appeared to reflect the narrator's experience of the events they recounted. I noted other structural elements of the narratives, such as the use of pronouns – moves from "I" to "we" - and the use of syntax, such as passive constructions to express

passivity, and repetition for strength. The attention to structure helped to develop a picture of the experience of moving in (and out) of an undocumented status.

#### **3.4.4 Phase four: Telling and retelling the narratives**

During the fourth phase of analysis, I aimed to enhance the validity of my analysis by telling and retelling the narratives to various audiences to test the persuasiveness of my interpretation (Polkinghorne, 2007). To do so, I secured a research grant to conduct a four-month fellowship at Fudan University, Shanghai, during which time I coordinated a workshop for social work students, practitioners and academics. At the workshop, I presented my preliminary analysis about Chinese migrants' experiences of undocumented status to a Chinese academic and professional social work audience. The feedback I received can be categorised into three key questions that were asked of the inquiry, and of me as the reteller of participants' stories:

i) How can migrants' experiences of undocumented status be understood in relation to their life stories? Further questions about why participants had migrated and why they did not return accompanied this broader question.

ii) How did migrants' background affect their migration goals and their hopes for the future? I was encouraged to consider biographical details, such as: gender; position in the family; familial expectations; rural or urban background; regional identity; age at time of migration; education; and confidence in asking for help.

iii) How did migrants' networks sustain their undocumented lives in the UK? A related question was how does this information inform a social work response to Chinese undocumented migrants' needs?

I reflected on the feedback received from colleagues in Shanghai with the supervisory team and rewrote (and retold) the preliminary research texts to ensure that the questions asked were touchstones in the analysis. This process helped to develop the final research text. In the interpretation of the narratives contained in chapters four, five and six, the traces of all four phases of analysis are evident.

### **3.5 Ethical tensions**

This study was originally approved by Keele University's Ethical Review Panel in March 2017. As outlined in chapter one, the focus of the study was modified during the fieldwork in response to the age range of potential participants. When I modified the study to focus on working age undocumented Chinese migrants, I submitted a subsequent application which was approved in March 2018 by the university Ethical Review Panel (letters confirming approval are contained in appendix D). Through a continuous dialogue with members of the Ethical Review Panel, members were assured that the selected methods adhered to the principles underpinning ethical research design, including: ensuring a process for informed consent, protecting participants' identities and doing no harm (see Machin & Shardlow, 2018, appendix A, for a discussion of the dialogic process of acquiring ethical approval). However, the acquisition of ethical approval was the beginning rather than the end of the consideration of ethics. I encountered a series of ethical tensions which were related to the nature of the topic under study, my relationships with participants and the dual aim of representing participants' lives whilst contributing to knowledge. These ethical tensions were connected with the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this study. Josselson (2007) argued that a "cookbook" approach to resolving ethical tensions in narrative inquiry is neither possible nor desirable

(p.538). Instead, she defined an “ethical attitude” toward narrative research as an approach that involves: “deciding how best to honour and protect those who participate in one’s studies while still maintaining standards for responsible scholarship”. (p.538). Here, I describe my ‘ethical attitude’ toward the tensions I encountered.

### **3.5.1 Protecting participants’ identities: anonymity, consent and trustworthiness**

Protecting participants’ identities was an important consideration. Participation risked revealing irregular migrants’ statuses and their involvement in ‘illegal’ activities, such as working without a permit, driving without a license and using falsified documents. The increased visibility involved in participation in any research project has serious implications for individuals who actively conceal their migration status in certain contexts to avoid enforcement action. To minimise this risk, I avoided recording participants’ real names and instead used pseudonyms. Four participants selected their own pseudonyms, and I selected the other nine, at participants’ request, to match the form of their real names. For example, I selected English names for participants who were known by an English name and matched the number of characters for those who preferred to be known by Chinese names. I asked participants to sign consent forms with either a cross or with their pseudonym. Aware that participation could reveal migrants’ irregular status to others in the community, I asked participants to choose interview venues in which they felt most comfortable. I explained the limits of confidentiality to encourage participants to make an informed decision about the information they shared (see information sheet and consent form in appendix D). I also considered how to protect the identity of other characters in migrants’ stories, such as spouses, children, friends and colleagues. For example, I respected the request of Zhan Fang (绽芳) to turn the audio recorder off when she discussed her

husband who had lived in the UK with an irregular status for 18 years. Additionally, when the interviews were transcribed, I omitted details which could have identified participants or other characters in their narratives. Importantly, I followed the recommendation of Düvell et al., (2010) to avoid questions about criminal practises, including how migrants had travelled to the UK, to prevent the acquisition of incriminating information which could, potentially, be used by enforcement agents.

However, the consideration of participants' anonymity extended beyond the research interviews and remained prominent as I drafted initial field texts and then converted these to preliminary and final research texts. The choice I made, long after interviews, to craft and present participants' narratives in long form incurred additional risks as readers may develop a sense of participants' lives from their stories. This decision served an epistemological purpose – to honour the individual stories of participants and to enhance trustworthiness by allowing readers to trace my interpretive steps (Riessman, 2008). Whilst it is unlikely that a reader who does not know a participant would be able to identify them, it may be possible for a reader from one of the sites of the study to identify participants. Although consent forms dealt with how participants' information would be used, including the use of direct quotations, participants did not have the opportunity to comment on the presentation of their narratives in the final text. Perhaps, as Josselson (2007) argued, this would be impractical given that the final text in this inquiry represents my interpretation, constructed after I left the field.

### **3.5.2 Reciprocity and power in the research relationships**

The relationships I developed with participants had ethical dimensions which centred around the conflict between the social norms of reciprocity and the position of power I held as

researcher. I developed rapport and a sense of collaboration with participants by making use of different aspects of my identity. For example, I used my professional background in social work to signpost participants to services when they were seeking support. My training in teaching English as an additional language equipped me to offer free language classes in which I also talked with Chinese parents about their children's education. My experience of living in China and studying Chinese language and culture became a common reference point in conversations. The sense of reciprocity developed with participants perhaps accounted for why only four participants accepted a £20 voucher as remuneration for the time commitment they made to the study: despite my repeated offers, most participants said that taking part in the study was “没事” (“nothing” or “no trouble”).

Despite the reciprocity shared with many participants, I undoubtedly held a powerful position as a researcher. I purposively initiated relationships with participants, I had power over the interpretation of the narratives and the benefits of authorship belong to me (Ellis, 2007, p.5). The issue of power in the research relationships was complicated further by the sensitive nature of the topic under study: participants may have positioned me as a moral judge of their behaviour because of internalised shame about being subjected to an ‘illegal’ migration status (see Hydén, 2014). As in all narrative inquiries, the final research text is my own, crafted from participants' stories.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have justified the selection of narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology used to conduct this study, and the fit with the research aims. In doing so, I have outlined my

theoretical orientation to the study of undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences. I have also described the research process and my approach to analysis of participants' narratives. The discussion of ethical tensions is focused on the issues involved in engaging a potentially vulnerable group of people in a narrative study. My aim to understand, interpret and represent the personal stories of Chinese migrants placed me in a powerful position in relation to participants. Therefore, I have sought to acknowledge and reflect on the unbalanced nature of the research relationship in the final section of the chapter. In the next three chapters, I present my interpretation of participants' narratives created during the study.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender / age	Country / Province of origin	Highest level of education	Marital status / no. of children	Employment status	Length of time in the UK	Status at time of interview
Joanne	F / 33	China / Fujian	Senior Middle School	Married / 3 children	Unemployed	13 years	Documented (previously undocumented for 3 years)
Nian Zhen 念真	F / 31-40	China / Fujian	High School	Separated / 2 children	Employed / waitress in a Chinese Restaurant)	15 years	Documented (previously semi-undocumented for 5 years)
Zhan Fang 绽芳	F / 41-50	China / Fujian	High School	Married / 1 child	Unemployed	10 months	Documented (temporary status)
Meng 梦	F / 31-40	China / Guangdong	High School	Married / 1 child	Unemployed	6 months	Documented (temporary status)
Wang 王	M / 51-60	China / Shanghai	High School	Married / 1 child	Employed / chef in	7 years	Documented (previously subject to a

					Chinese restaurant		temporary status)
John	M / 22	Hong Kong	College	Single	Employed / Waiter in Chinese restaurant	14 years	Documented (temporary status and previously undocumented)
Jin 金	F / 41-50	China / Fujian	Junior Middle School	Married / 3 children	Unemployed	10 years	Undocumented
Sarah	F / 24	Born in South America, parents from China, Guangdong	University (undergraduate)	Single	Student	16 years	Documented (temporary status and previously undocumented)
Fei Hong 飞鸿	M / 50	China / Tianjin	High school	Married / 1 child	Self-Employed / Chinese restaurant owner	13 years	Documented (previously undocumented)
Yellow Flower	F / 50	China / Guangdong	University (Masters)	Separated / 1 child	Employed (informal	3 years	Undocumented

黄花					cleaning work)		
Yu Yan 语嫣	F / 41	China / Fujian	Primary school	Married / 3 children	Unemployed	14 years	Documented (previously undocumented for 9 years).
Feng Mian 风眠	F / 38	China / Fujian	High school	Married / 2 children	Unemployed	10 years	Undocumented
Z	M / 18	China / Guangdong	College	Single	Student	3 years	Undocumented

## **Chapter 4 The shift to an undocumented status**

### **4.1 Introduction**

As outlined in the previous chapter, narrative interviews were conducted with Chinese migrants to explore their experiences of an undocumented status in the UK. In this chapter, and the two chapters that follow, I present my interpretation of participants' narratives in relation to the research questions that guided this study. In the account of my approach to analysis presented in chapter three, I outlined how I crafted the interview transcripts into coherent narratives to convey the lived experience of migrants in relation to each research question. In this chapter, I present the stories crafted from Jin, Sarah and Yellow Flower's interviews alongside my narrative analysis. These three stories were selected because they represented typical themes in relation to the first research question: how did Chinese migrants experience the shift to an undocumented status? In this chapter, and the two proceeding chapters, I present participants' narratives in long form, presented as boxed text, followed by my interpretation of each story. I begin with Jin's story of an irregular entry, followed by Sarah's story of growing up into an undocumented status and, finally, Wang's story of a semi-documented status. The chapter ends with a commentary in which I draw together the key themes, narrative techniques and reoccurring stories that related to participants' experience of the shift to an undocumented status.

### **4.2 An irregular entry**

One pathway into an undocumented status experienced by participants in the study was an irregular entry which took place at the UK border. This pathway was a strategy for participants, particularly those from Fujian province, to enter the UK to earn money and to reunite with

spouses. The narrative presented below is taken from Jin's story of her migration to the UK. In the extract, the abbreviation 'I1' means 'Interviewer 1' and refers to me, the lead interviewer during fieldwork. The term 'I2' is shorthand for 'Interviewer 2' and refers to the bilingual Research Assistant who supported interviews conducted in Chinese. 'P' is used as shorthand for 'participant'. Interviews that were conducted in English, without the support of the Research Assistant, use the shorthand 'I' to refer to myself, the sole interviewer. In the discussion that follows, I present my narrative analysis of the salient themes in Jin's story: the circumstances leading to her migration; the contrast between Jin's expectations of her migration vs the reality she faced; and her initial arrival experiences in the UK.

#### 4.2.1 Jin's (金) story

I1: Can you tell me your story of migrating to the UK?

P: My story of coming to the UK? Now the state allows you to give birth to the second child, but back in 2007, the one-child policy was very strict in China. At that time, I gave birth to my second child in China and the government was very strict about this, so I was fined for having more than one child. Later, people around me suggested that I should go abroad so that I could earn more money to provide a better life for my parents and brothers because I am the eldest daughter in my family. I thought it made a lot of sense and I wanted to go out and fight, so I came to the UK. But things did not turn out the way I wanted. There are various

kinds of difficulties, and it's hard for you to find a job, even if you do find a job, you have to do it secretly, like a thief.

I used to think that going abroad would give me a promising future. And in order to go abroad, I could put everything aside. In fact, after you come here, you'll find things don't turn out the way you want.

I1: Did you try to change your status when you first arrived here?

P: At that time, there was neither chance nor time for me to think about changing my status. First of all, you spent a lot of money to go abroad, right? Then you must try to repay the money first, or your parents would have to live a hard life. So, regardless of the wage, we would generally take whatever jobs as long as we were paid, right? We had to convince our parents that we could make a living here in the UK in the first place. After that, we might think about applying for status so that we could live a better life in the future. Actually, I didn't mind being black [undocumented] for a few years, because I could at least make some money. So, I worked desperately when I just came here, and I never thought of changing my immigration status. Those who just came here usually won't think about that [regularizing their status]. Before I came here, I was thinking about going abroad to work hard for a few years. We saved money in every way we could when we just came here. We were even reluctant to spend half a pound, because one pound equals to almost ten yuan.

I was in London when I first came here. They sent me to a place. I don't know whether it was a church. They sent me there and asked me to go out on my own. It was awful. I couldn't tell east from west or north from south. That was

really a hard time. Now, whenever I come across any difficulty, I'll pray to God. Back at that time, I really didn't know where to go. And it's late at night. Later, they told me to take a taxi. "Take a taxi and tell the driver where you want to go", they told me. So, I took a taxi to Chinatown to look for my friends. That was really a miserable time. I was arrested at the airport when I first came here. Later, I was released, and they let me go on my own. I completely didn't know where to go. When I just came here, I didn't have a job, and I lived at my friend's home. Though my friend didn't ask me to leave, I could feel her unwillingness. That was really a hard time. Now, I feel quite relieved, the past is the past, and nobody knows what will happen tomorrow.

### *Circumstances leading to migration*

When invited to tell her story about coming to the UK, Jin began her narrative in her hometown in Fujian. To describe her motivation for migrating irregularly, she first explained that the one child policy in China meant that, when she gave birth to her second child, she was fined. This simple statement suggested that in Jin's life in China, political structures had a direct effect on her family life. Jin's narrative then turned quickly to her family: her two daughters, parents and brothers in China. She explained that she was the eldest in her family and implied that she had a responsibility to provide for her family and she positioned her migration as a strategy to improve the lives of her family members, perhaps implicitly constructing her responsibility in terms of Confucian notions of filial responsibility (孝) or rural Chinese family structures. This framing of the decision to migrate as a family strategy was typical of the whole set of narratives.

Jin explained that the idea to migrate overseas to provide for her family was suggested to her by the people around her, rather than a decision she made independently. Other participants also talked about the influence that friends and people in their hometowns had on their decision to migrate. Jin's family's story, where both Jin and her husband left their young children to earn money overseas, is not unusual in the context of Fujianese culture. Similar story arcs emerged in Yu Yan and Feng Mian's narratives. As discussed in chapter two, Fujian is known as a migrant-sending (侨乡) province in China with established chains of international migration. Jin's description of meeting with friends in London's Chinatown when she first arrived suggested that she had a network of hometown contacts (老乡) already based in the UK who were awaiting her arrival. Jin summarised her decision to migrate with the emphatic clause, "I wanted to go out and fight". This phrase was also used by other participants in the study and suggested a willingness to endure hardships to improve her own life and the lives of her family members.

### *Expectations vs reality*

Despite Jin's desire to "fight" for a better life, her expectations of migrating to the UK were at odds with the reality she experienced. Jin was prepared to "work hard" and to tolerate low wages, but she was not prepared for the fact that finding work would be extremely difficult or that she would have to work "secretly, like a thief". Although Jin knew she was entering the UK as an undocumented migrant (Jin used a colloquial Chinese term for undocumented migrant – "黑", meaning "black" - a shortened version of "黑户" or "黑人" – "black passport" or "black person"), her narrative suggested that she had not realised the full implications of this status. In part, the difficult reality faced by Jin that contrasted with her expectations may be related to the

hostile environment immigration policies enacted in the UK since her arrival. Jin's claim that she was able to work and make money during her first few years in the UK was echoed in the narratives of other participants. However, several participants described employers' growing reluctance to hire undocumented migrants due to the introduction of employer sanctions and the increase in workplace raids by immigration officers.

To make the migration a success, Jin explained that she "put everything aside" and made great sacrifices to migrate to the UK. She left her three daughters and her parents and brother and paid a large sum of money to migrate. The money was loaned from her parents and Jin and her husband "worked desperately" when they first arrived in the UK until they had paid back the debt owed. Jin's statement that she was "reluctant to spend half a pound" gave a sense of how frugal she had to be to repay the debt. The considerable investment made by parents back in China and the necessity of paying back this loan was a common feature of the stories of participants who migrated irregularly. After paying off the debt, Jin's full narrative revealed that her father passed away, leaving her mother as the sole carer for her three daughters. Jin's status meant that she was unable to return to China to join her family in mourning her father's death. Jin's disappointment about the result of her sacrifices was palpable in her statement: "I used to think that going abroad would give me a promising future ...but things didn't turn out how I wanted".

### *Arrival experiences*

Having compared her expectations with the harsh realities of her life in the UK, Jin's narrative developed to recall, in a fragmented way, the first hours and days of her arrival. Her account was non-linear and moved backwards and forwards in time, between her arrival at an

unspecified airport and subsequent arrest (presumably for not having the appropriate documents), and her stay with an “unwilling” friend. The narrative took place in several locations: at an airport, a church, a taxi, and finally Jin arrived in London’s Chinatown. Jin made several references to a third person “they”, without assigning an identity to this repeated pronoun. “They” appeared to be in control of Jin’s arrival, giving her instructions about where to go and how to travel. It is unclear from the account if she was referring to the people who facilitated her irregular migration, the police (following her arrest at the airport), or other voluntary workers or professionals associated with the church to which she was taken. The account reflected how disorientating the experience was for Jin, captured in the clause, “I couldn’t tell east from west or north from south.” The emotional impact of this arrival experience was conveyed in the evaluative clauses that frequently interrupted the plot, such as: “it was awful”; “that was really a hard time”; and “that was really a miserable time” (那时候真的好惨好惨).

The experience of arrest, detention and release that Jin faced when she first arrived in the UK became a reoccurring pattern in her full narrative as she had been repeatedly “caught” (in her words) and detained in immigration detention centres. Jin joked that she did not understand why Home Office officials were so interested in her. Despite her jovial manner, Jin’s accounts of being arrested during the night and taken to detention centres with her young daughter were imbued with anxiety. The final sentence of Jin’s arrival story acted as a coda to bring the story to a close; “Now, I feel quite relieved, the past is the past, and nobody knows what will happen tomorrow.” After recalling difficult past experiences throughout the interview, Jin returned to the present day, frequently repeating the phrases “take it day by day” (做一天过一天) and “take it

step by step” (走一步算一步). Jin’s strategy for dealing with the uncertainty of her migration status was to focus on the present and remain open about the future.

### **4.3 Growing up into an undocumented status**

Another pathway into irregularity identified in participants’ narratives related specifically to those who had migrated to the UK as children. These participants’ stories of becoming subject to an undocumented status as they approached adulthood captured a gradual process in which the legal provisions that applied to them as children were replaced by the legal constraints that applied to their new identity as undocumented adults. The narrative presented below, Sarah’s story, provides an example of the experience of growing up into an undocumented status. In my discussion of Sarah’s story, I examine: her gradual realisation about her irregular status; irregularity as a family secret; and, finally, her experience of being trapped in the present.

#### **4.3.1 Sarah’s story**

I: Would you mind telling me your story about moving to the UK?

P: I don’t really know much about it to be honest because it was normally my parents that took care of everything because we were really young, we didn’t really understand about immigration, we just went wherever our parents took us. And erm, it was only until we got a bit older that we realised that things weren’t normal, like, we couldn’t go on holidays, we couldn’t leave the UK. And I heard

that was to do with my dad's employer at the time. He didn't, erm, I don't know what it's called, like “報稅” [return tax], like tax or something.

I: Right, he didn't pay taxes?

P: Erm, for my dad, so my Dad became, I don't know, eventually we found a solicitor who was supposed to help us with our immigration application, and then they went bankrupt and they didn't tell us and they just left and then we just woke up one morning and we were illegal. And then, its only until four years ago that we officially got status. But up until that point we were, I think we call it “black”. Yeah, I can't remember very much, I don't know what else. Yeah, it was quite, it was quite difficult.

We couldn't do a lot of things, like, I couldn't have a bank account, my sisters, my sister and my brother and me we didn't have bank accounts. Erm, when we turned 17, we couldn't apply for a driving license. Erm, just really basic stuff that other people had access to that we didn't. Like, we couldn't even get a national insurance in order to work. And we couldn't apply for university, so we didn't have an education. We couldn't find a proper job apart from, erm, Chinatown jobs where they would pay you very little. And sometimes you feel threatened if you work there because there's always the fear that they might report you to the Home Office so there's nothing you can do. And, so it was quite, quite a journey [laughs].

I was very depressed for a while. Well, I was anyway, and I know my Mum was as well. It felt like we couldn't move forward, and we couldn't go back so we were just always stuck in this middle ground, not really being allowed to do

anything. Erm, and my Mum was really frustrated because at that time we did have a takeaway, we were paying taxes, we were contributing and, we were contributing a lot, they took a lot from us. And, yet we weren't allowed anything so it felt a bit unfair.

### *A gradual realisation about status*

Sarah began her story of migrating to the UK as an eight-year-old child with the phrase, “I don't really know much about it”. This opening sentence set the scene for a narrative in which Sarah and her family had little control over the events that happened. The sentence also alluded to Sarah's limited understanding, especially as a young child, in relation to her own migration story and legal status. Sarah explained that the decision to migrate was made by her parents who “took care of everything” as she and her siblings were “really young” and they “didn't really understand about immigration”. Therefore, the decision was framed outside of Sarah's, and her siblings', control. The circumstances that led to the family becoming undocumented were centred around Sarah's father's employer failing to report tax returns on behalf of her father, which invalidated his work visa. In this opening section, Sarah also described how the family sought help from a solicitor who went bankrupt and, as she revealed later in the narrative, disappeared with a large fee and the family's documents. The narrative suggested that Sarah and her family had limited agency over their migration status, in contrast with other characters, such as employers and lawyers, who held considerable control over their legal identities.

Next, the narrative turned to Sarah and her siblings' realisation over time that they had an irregular migration status. They discovered as they grew older that “things weren't normal”. Sarah repeatedly returned to the idea of a “normal” against which her life was unfavourably

compared throughout the narrative. As a young child, this contrast with a “normal” life was realised in small differences, such as the fact that the family could not go on holiday or leave the UK. As Sarah and her siblings reached adulthood, their irregular status had an increasingly harmful impact on their development. A similar story arc was also found in John and Z’s narratives, the other participants in the study who migrated to the UK as children with their mothers. Sarah, John and Z were able to access education as children until they reached the age of 18 when their status began to have a more punitive effect on their opportunities for education and employment. Sarah, John and Z’s narratives suggested that there was an intersection between age and status that had a powerful effect on the experience of shifting to an undocumented status.

As Sarah slowly realised that she had an irregular status, her understanding of the causes of this status developed. Sarah stated, “I heard that was to do with my dad’s employer. He didn’t, erm, I don’t know what it’s called, like, “報稅” [return tax], like tax or something. So my dad became, I don’t know.” This clause suggested that Sarah was not told directly about the events that led to the family becoming undocumented. Instead, the use of “I heard” created an image of a child overhearing adult conversations and using these fragments to piece together a narrative about the family’s status. She ended this part of her story with the clause, “I don’t know”, almost afraid to articulate that her father, and, subsequently, the family, became undocumented. This theme of making sense of fragments of information reoccurred later in the interview when Sarah described her experience of translating letters from the Home Office on behalf of her parents as a young child:

I just remember getting loads of letters in big brown envelopes and every time, cause my Mum couldn’t read English, we had to read it and translate it back to her

and then it would be like, ‘deportation’, ‘illegal’ and stuff like that. Couldn’t even read some of the words, didn’t know what the words meant, but I just knew that it wasn’t good stuff, it was bad news.

Although Sarah was responsible for translating these Home Office documents for her non-English speaking parents, her understanding of their meaning was partial. However, she intuited that the letters were “bad news” for the family. Sarah’s sense that the letters were “bad news”, coupled with the emotional impact of these letters, which Sarah later described as “a big blow to the family, we’d be depressed for weeks”, suggested that growing up as an undocumented child was a frightening and disorientating experience.

Having described how her understanding of her status developed as she grew older, capturing a long passage of time (the family were undocumented for approximately 12 years), Sarah then returned to the time that the family’s status shifted to become undocumented. This was conveyed as a sudden shift that occurred overnight: “we woke up one morning and we were illegal”. The juxtaposition of the everyday activity, “we woke up one morning”, with the extraordinary phrase, “we were illegal”, emphasised the dramatic impact of this shift in status. This clause again highlighted the fact that the shift in status was outside of the family’s control – all they did was wake up, a mundane, daily action, but that particular morning, their status had changed.

### *Irregularity as a family secret*

The language Sarah used to tell her story of growing up into an undocumented status suggested that she was revealing a long-held family secret. Although the interview took place in English, Sarah code switched between English, the language she had acquired through her

education in the UK, and Cantonese, the language she spoke at home with her family. The uncertainty with which Sarah translated Cantonese terms that related to her status into English suggested that she had rarely spoken about the shift to an undocumented status to others outside of her family. For example, Sarah hesitated when translating the colloquial Chinese term for undocumented, “黑”: “*I think we call it ‘black’*”. She also expressed uncertainty about how to translate the circumstances in which her father’s work visa was invalidated: “*I don’t know what it’s called, like, ‘報稅’ [return tax], like tax or something*”. The difficulty Sarah encountered when translating this key incident suggested that she had long maintained her story of growing up into an undocumented status as a family secret. Later in her interview, Sarah confirmed this when she explained: “it wasn’t safe to tell people that, you know, you had no status. Didn’t know who you could trust.”

Interestingly, Sarah was one of the few participants in the study who referred to herself, and her family, as “illegal”. She discussed her story with terms derived from UK policy discourses about undocumented migration, such as: “immigration”, “deportation” and “status”. Her grasp of the official English terms suggested that she was aware of the pejorative framing of undocumented migrants in mainstream UK political and media discourse. By code switching between the personal, Cantonese terms used within her own family, and the English terms taken from policy and mainstream discourse, Sarah seemed to bring two languages, with two different ways of framing undocumented status, into dialogue with each other. The effect was to produce two narrative accounts of the shift to an undocumented status: one in which the shift was a deeply personal family tragedy; and another outward-facing narrative in which an undocumented status was a source of shame and therefore a secret to be concealed from others.

The narrative voice that Sarah used to tell her story also suggested how deeply intertwined her own experience of an irregular status was with her family's experience. For example, there were few clauses in which Sarah used the singular first-person narrative voice. Instead, she mostly told her narrative through the plural "we", relating her own experiences to that of her siblings and parents. Additionally, when constructing the impact of the shift to an undocumented status on her inner life, Sarah identified closely with her mother and their shared experience of depression. These linguistic devices indicate that Sarah's migration story was not an individual narrative, but a family story.

### *Suspended in the present*

Having explained how the family became undocumented, Sarah then described the impact of undocumented status on herself and her siblings. Beginning with the clause "we couldn't do a lot of things", she then listed activities that she was excluded from, including: "have a bank account"; "apply for a driving license", "get a national insurance [number]", "apply for university" and "find a proper job". All these activities were associated with certain stages and ages in the transition to adulthood that Sarah and her siblings were unable to pass through. Sarah compared her experiences with her peers, again evoking a "normal" that her life had diverged from: "just really basic stuff that other people had access to that we didn't". Instead of passing through the milestones that mark the transition to adulthood, Sarah was trapped in the present: "It felt like we couldn't move forward, and we couldn't go back so we were just always stuck in this middle ground". The sense of time paused evoked in this clause is emphasised by the contrast with the other uses of time in the extract: the slow realisation about status; and the sudden shift to an "illegal" status.

Whilst trapped in the present, the fact that Sarah was unable to apply for university alongside her friends and peers became a significant theme in the interview as it was a source of disappointment. Sarah's only option was to find a "Chinatown job" where the pay was low and the risk of being reported to the Home Office high. The phrase "Chinatown job" captured a set of experiences that Sarah went on to detail in the full interview which included: low pay; long working hours; few breaks; only one day off per week; and poor treatment by colleagues and customers. These experiences were shared by other participants who had knowledge of "Chinatown jobs" (explored in the next chapter). Despite these hardships, Sarah, along with most of the participants in the study, was grateful for the opportunity to work when other options were closed off to her due to her irregular status.

In the final paragraph of the above extract, Sarah turned to her inner world and the impact of undocumented status on her mental health. Sarah identified closely with her mother when she explained that they both felt "depressed for a while". In her full narrative, Sarah articulated how the uncertainty of her future, her lack of control, combined with her inability to confide in friends about her current circumstances, left her anxious and isolated. This emotional experience appeared to have led to a sense of injustice as Sarah stressed that, during the years that the family were without legal status, they worked hard to run a successful takeaway and to pay tax on their earnings. In a series of clauses that repeated the same point four times, she stressed that the family were "contributing": "we were paying taxes, we were contributing and, we were contributing a lot, they took a lot from us". Despite their contributions, the family received little in return and they "weren't allowed to do anything". However, this sense of injustice was diluted in the concluding sentence: "it felt a bit unfair". Sarah's tone and language became softer as she brought this part of the story to an end. Sarah's sense of injustice about her family's difficult

story appeared to be mitigated by her understanding of the official language of immigration discourse and the mainstream perceptions of “illegal” migration.

#### **4.4 A semi-documented status**

The third pathway into irregularity identified across participants’ narratives related to the Chinese migrants in the study who were, or had been, subjected to a ‘semi-documented’ status (a term borrowed from Paraskevopoulou, 2011, p.113) such as a temporary work or spouse visa. Although legally able to work and reside in the UK, such migrants walked a thin line between documented and undocumented as any violation of the requirements of their visa would invalidate their right to reside in the UK and push them into an irregular status. Such a violation could occur as a result of the actions of others, such as employers or spouses. In this section, I present Wang’s narrative in which he recalled his experience of a semi-documented status subject to a five-year work visa. In the interpretation of the narrative that follows, I examine: Wang’s non-linear journey to the UK, his experience of being trapped by the work visa and, finally, his account of waiting to become a ‘whole migrant’. Wang’s interview took place with his wife, Meng, at the request of both participants. Although they told their migration stories in turn, their narratives also weaved in and out of each narrator’s perspectives and experiences.

##### **4.4.1 Wang’s (王) story**

P: After graduating from high school, I came to the UK. People tried persuading me to go to college, but I didn’t because I was so in the mood for

making money. I qualified to get the permanent residence in 2010, but I was advised that I could obtain the British citizenship because I had this certificate, and I came to the UK quite early.

Considering that my wife and my child were still in Shanghai, my son was only two years old when I left Shanghai, I thought it would be more convenient for them to come here if I got the British citizenship.

After studying here for about six months, I passed the test and obtained the certificate. After that, I worked among those foreigners. I only studied English related to kitchen work. The fundamental reason was that I didn't have time to because we all know that people who come to the UK mostly have to work apart from studying English. For semi-immigrants like us who apply for a work visa to come here, your work is the centre. When you are in the kitchen, you can't do many other things. I got the work visa after staying in the UK for five years. I was afraid that the allowable number of immigration certificates would be reduced. Moreover, people might deliberately make things difficult for you if you only have the permanent residence. You have to do this, for there's no other way out. That's why I said every Chinese who came to the UK has got story of hot and bitter tears.

On impulse, I wanted to come here, to the UK, because there was a fever of going abroad in Shanghai during the 1980s and the 1990s. Some people went to Japan, some went to America, and some to the UK. A lot of people went abroad. I wanted to come to the UK. In 2010, I came to the UK where there are two cultures [British culture and the culture of the established, Hong Kong-Chinese

community]. And I have never been subjected to such abuses while working in China. I was mistreated by the Chinese living in the UK rather than the native British. That job was overloaded. In fact, people used to think it was hard working in China. I think they were wrong because they had never gone abroad and experienced how difficult it was working overseas. You can go and ask anyone who came here with a work visa, and I believe he or she will probably cry. So those who came to the UK with a work visa really have their stories of hot and bitter tears, really bitterness and tears. Why? Because you're an immigrant with a work visa, you just can't quit the job. There's a contract between you and your boss. If you offend your boss, he can refuse to report your tax returns or even eliminate your work visa. Then you'll be finished, and you have to go back, otherwise you can't even change your job. If I want to do another job, I'll need the certificate issued by my current boss, without which I can't change my job. Therefore, the blood and tears of the work visa started here. He [your employer] will catch you tightly.

Therefore, to stay and live in the UK, you really have to worry about many things. And you're unable to find a way out. But there are also a lot of people who do not care about this. It doesn't matter to them because they smuggled in and they don't expect their family to come, so it just doesn't matter. Instead, such people can be free and unfettered, am I right? However, we came here with a goal, what is that? We came here because we want to bring our family here so that our children can receive better education than they can back in China, and this is for sure.

### *A non-linear journey to the UK*

Wang's narrative began with reference to his first trip to the UK in 1989 and his first (of three) visa application rejection. His early experiences of travel to the UK were intertwined throughout his narrative with his current stay, of seven years at the time of the interview. In his full narrative, Wang also described several migration sub-plots: he had spent ten years running a Chinese restaurant in North America, only for his application for permanent residence to be declined. His hometown was Shanghai, but he had married a woman, Meng, from Guangdong who then migrated internally from the countryside in the South of China to the large municipality of Shanghai. The scale of the change that Meng had to adapt to left her dependent on Wang, "like a child", to organise her daily life. Therefore, when he left her alone in Shanghai with their two-year-old son to migrate to the UK, both Wang and Meng "suffered a lot" to adapt to their new circumstances as they set upon a long-term strategy to reunite in the UK in the future. This strategy was successful, and Wang's wife and son had joined him in the UK six months prior to the interview.

Behind the success of Wang's overarching family migration story were a series of twists and turns in Wang's migration goals and the strategies he used to pursue these goals. For example, Wang's contrasting statements about his migration goals suggested that his motivations changed over time. As a young man, he was motivated by "impulse" and a "mood for making money" (那时候脑子进了钱里面了). This "mood" was influenced by the fact that many of his peers migrated internationally during the 1980s and 90s as there was a "fever of going abroad" at that time in Shanghai. This "fever" is likely to have been fuelled by narratives about overseas Chinese earning large amounts of money and sending remittances home. However, as the story progressed, and captured Wang's growing age, increased responsibility after getting married and

having a child, his business successes and difficulties, his goal changed and became more serious and resolute: “to improve our child’s education”.

The change in Wang’s strategy to achieve his migration goal was also captured in his narrative. Having originally planned to apply for permanent residence after five years subject to a work visa, Wang was advised that he was eligible to apply for British citizenship. He seized this opportunity and changed his migration strategy, as he judged that British citizenship would help him to fulfil his plan of bringing his family to the UK. This change of strategy involved the loss of Wang’s Chinese citizenship and the loss of his pension savings built up over 30 years in China. The change also drew a firm boundary between Wang’s present life and his past, to which he could no longer return.

### *Trapped by the work visa*

Whilst narrating the plot of his migration, Wang also evaluated his own story, labelling it “a miserable story”, the telling of which evoked “hot and bitter tears” (辛酸泪). Wang’s account of the cause of his difficulties were centred around how his relationship with his employer mediated his relationship with the state and influenced his status security. In contrast with the caring relationship of dependence he described between himself and his wife when she first moved to Shanghai, Wang described his relationship with his “老板” (boss) as a form of trap. He explained that he was dependent on his employer to maintain his employment and to report his tax returns to comply with the conditions of his work visa. Wang used a series of conditional clauses to describe what would happen if he challenged his boss or his working conditions: “if you offend your boss, he can refuse to report your tax returns or even eliminate your work visa.

Then you'll be finished. If I want to do another job, I'll need the certificate issued by my current boss". Wang's description captured a sense of entrapment in exploitative working conditions: despite being "overloaded" and "mistreated", he had no recourse to complain or to leave the job without compromising his status.

The field notes I recorded after the interview with Wang and Meng noted how, when describing his experience of exploitation in the Chinese catering industry, Wang's otherwise jovial demeanour changed. His sense of injustice, like Sarah above, was evident in the change in his tone and body language. He sat more upright, leant forward, gesticulated with more vigour, raised his voice and eventually became tearful and took a break from the interview to compose himself. Wang seemed particularly disturbed by the fact that his exploitation had taken place at the hands of Chinese restaurant owners from Hong Kong who were well-established in the UK. Although Wang had expected to encounter difficulties in UK society, he had not anticipated that he would have to face an exploitative culture within the Chinese catering industry. Wang lamented, "I have never been subjected to such abuses while working in China. I was mistreated by the Chinese living in the UK rather than the native British." The difficulties Wang had endured and the power imbalance in his relationship with his employer were summarised in the concluding clause: "the blood and tears of the work visa started here. He [your employer] will catch you tightly" (他死死抓住你). This visceral description of entrapment seemed fitting for the physical and emotional hardships of work that Wang described in his wider narrative.

Although Wang's narrative was a story of personal endurance to acquire British citizenship, he also related his experiences to other Chinese migrants subject to a work visa with phrases such as: "every Chinese who came to the UK has got a miserable story"; "You can go and ask anyone who came here with a work visa, and I believe he or she will probably cry"; "those who

came to the UK with a work visa really have their own stories of hot and bitter tears”. In his wider narrative, Wang also acknowledged that the difficulties he experienced in the UK were mirrored by his wife’s experiences who, having been left alone without a support network in Shanghai, had to “climb up” to survive. These examples typify how, throughout the narrative, Wang related his own suffering to the suffering of others.

### *Waiting to become a ‘whole migrant’*

Having left his wife and child in Shanghai and endured exploitative working conditions in the UK, Wang felt that he had no choice but to pursue permanent residence in the UK. As Wang’s narrative progressed, the key message became increasingly singular: “there’s no other way out”. This phrase suggested that Wang’s ability to wait and to endure difficulties were his only means of escape. He referred to the option to return to China just once in the interview, quickly dismissing this as undesirable and likening a return to being “finished”. His inability to consider a return seemed to be grounded in the physical and emotional labour he had invested into his migration to the UK. In the context of his sacrifices, and those made by his family, a return to China became unthinkable.

To describe his status as a migrant subject to a work visa, Wang used the Chinese term “半移民” which directly translates as “half-migrant” or “semi-migrant”. This term suggested that migrating to the UK with a work visa involved a process of becoming, and implied that waiting and enduring were requirements of becoming a ‘whole migrant’. Wang compared his experience throughout the narrative with that of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. Although he recognised the hardships they experienced, Wang also highlighted the fact that they were free

from exploitative relationships with employers because, if they experienced poor treatment, they could find alternative employment. In this respect, undocumented migrants were “free and unfettered” (乐得逍遥了) by the burdens of status compliance that Wang had had to endure.

Wang located this freedom, implicitly, in undocumented migrant’s migration goals: because they did not plan to bring their families to the UK, undocumented migrants had fewer concerns about their conduct. Interestingly, this was not the case for the undocumented Chinese migrants in the study who all shared Wang’s goal of reuniting with their families in the UK.

Wang brought this section of his narrative to a close by reemphasising his goal, with the use of rhetorical questions for impact:

We came here with a goal, what is that? We came here because we want to bring our family here so that our children can receive better education than they can back in China, and this is for sure.

Wang had become increasingly resolute about his goal and the emphatic clause, “this is for sure”, underlined his certainty that this was the reason he has endured such difficulties. Perhaps this narrative sustained Wang through his difficult early years as a semi-documented migrant in the UK.

#### **4.5 Commentary**

The three story-types presented in this chapter depict the three different paths into undocumented (or semi-documented) status that were identified across the data set. Despite differences in the circumstances and events that led to participants being subjected to irregular statuses, Jin, Sarah and Wang’s stories shared commonalities in the way in which stories were

sequenced, characters were framed, and narrators' emotional responses were constructed. In the discussion below, I examine the commonalities in relation to plot, character and affect.

In all three accounts examined in this chapter, and in the wider set of narratives, the plot of participants' stories followed a broadly similar progression of themes. Most accounts, like Jin and Wang's, began in China and sketched participants' pre-migratory lives to explain their motivations for their migration. These pre-migratory lives, despite hardships, were often presented as a time of innocence before they had experienced the realities of an undocumented status (with one notable exception where previous experiences of domestic abuse overshadowed the narrator's migration story). Like their hometown friends and contacts (老乡) who had migrated before them, most participants made considerable sacrifices to migrate in the hope of a better life for themselves and their families. Participants like Sarah, who migrated to the UK as children, had fewer memories of their pre-migratory lives, but their stories similarly began during a time of innocence when their future lay ahead of them and would follow a "normal" trajectory. The shift to an undocumented status, then, became a key turning point in the lives of the narrators which changed the course of their futures. Descriptions of the effect of this turning point were the dramatic climax of Jin, Sarah and Wang's stories, and, indeed, most of the narratives in the study. Finally, narrators concluded their stories with a return to the present day.

Within this broadly similar progression of themes in the narratives, I, in my role as listener, often experienced a sense of disorientation which appeared to mirror participants' recall of disorienting events. This disorientation reflected the narrators' own experience of a stressful sequence of events in their lives. In Jin's narrative, for example, her disorientation upon arrival in the UK was conveyed with strength in her story: Jin was lost in unknown places, confused by the instructions of a nameless "they" and afraid. Jin's narrative became difficult to follow at this

point, mirroring her own experience. Similarly, Sarah's narrative conveyed a sense of disorientation as she described her gradual realisation that she was subjected to an undocumented status. Finally, Wang's story was perhaps the most non-linear in form, told through a series of anecdotes, with migration sub-plots, multiple trips to the UK and goals that changed over time. The sense of disorientation created in the narratives suggested that the shift to an undocumented status could create disorder in migrants' life stories that the narrators struggled to retell in a coherent way.

Turning to the use of character in the narratives, there were several commonalities in stories in this chapter that I also noted in the wider data set. First, although Jin, Sarah and Wang's narratives detailed their personal experiences, all three were told as stories of collective experience. The circumstances in which they migrated revolved around their family relationships and the decision to migrate appeared to be made at the level of the family rather than the individual. For example, Jin, the eldest of her siblings, had a responsibility to care for her siblings and parents as they aged, and her responsibility motivated her migration. The fact that her parents paid a large sum of money for her to be smuggled into the UK meant that her family were heavily invested in the success of her migration story. Wang's wife had also invested in her husband's migration story by enduring seven years alone in Shanghai, as an internal migrant, with her young child. This explains why Jin and Wang, like other participants, interweaved their own stories with the stories of their families. Jin's multiple reference to her parents, siblings and children left behind in China, Sarah's use of plural pronouns to convey a sense of shared experiences with her siblings and her mother, and Wang's awareness that his most difficult period of time was also a period of suffering for his wife in Shanghai, suggested that the stories were not just individual but family stories. Therefore, each narrator shared the role of 'main

character' with their family members: successes in the narrators' stories meant success for their family narratives.

The main characters also shared experiences of limited agency in relation to their status. Although Jin migrated to the UK irregularly through choice, her agency was constrained on arrival. Jin was afraid, forced to rely on unwilling others, separated from her husband who had migrated before her, and forced to face reoccurring incidents of arrest and detention due to her irregular status. Similarly, Sarah presented her shift to undocumented status as an event that was out of her control and beyond the control of her parents. Wang, to meet the requirements of his work visa, had to sacrifice his freedom to complain about his working conditions or to change his employment. In all three accounts, and in the wider set of narratives, other characters such as employers, solicitors and smugglers held power over the narrators' lives.

When recalling their experiences of the shift to an undocumented status, participants not only recalled the events in their narratives, but they also constructed the effect on their inner lives. In Jin, Sarah and Wang's narratives, and the wider data set, a sense of loss was conveyed by participants: loss of relationships, financial losses, loss of freedom and the loss of hopes for the future as participants' lives, dominated by status concerns, did not progress in the ways they had anticipated. The descriptions of these losses were emotional moments of most interviews, which suggested that the losses incurred because of undocumented status had a profound effect on participants' lives. Other salient emotional responses were shock and surprise. Most narrators told stories about how their experiences diverged from their expectations. For example, Jin had experienced the consequences of contravening state policy in China, but she was surprised by the degree of surveillance she had been subjected to by the UK Home Office. Additionally, Sarah's childhood had been shaped by her growing awareness that her family were different to others,

but the event that led to the family becoming ‘illegal’ was experienced as a shock that reverberated through Sarah’s life. Wang was also profoundly shocked by the abuses he had experienced in the Chinese catering industry and the fact that his exploitation was at the hands of Chinese restaurant owners. For most of the participants in the study, the shift to an undocumented status, even if part of a planned strategy, was a surprising life event in which their lives diverged from the expectations they had held prior to their migration.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined three story-types about the shift to an undocumented status identified across the data set. Some participants became undocumented as part of a planned migration strategy, some grew up into an undocumented status, and some came to the UK subject to a semi-legal status to discover that their experiences would be comparable with those without a regular status. Regardless of these differences, almost all the narrators framed the shift to an undocumented status as a major life event, which often spanned several years. Being made subject to an undocumented status marked a transition into a new life and drew a line under a past to which participants could no longer return. Such status shifts were also presented as the beginning of a passage through hardships in migrants’ narratives that would require endurance and patience to survive. Many participants had experienced difficulties in China, such as poverty, abuse, the consequences of violating state policies, unemployment and bankruptcy, but the experience of exploitation, state surveillance and the loss of freedom, agency and an imagined future, were described as a profound shock. However, these hardships were not experienced alone, at least not in the imaginations of participants. Narrators shared the role of main character in their stories with their family members, either those left in China or those present in the UK.

Telling their stories in collective rather than individual terms appeared to sustain participants through the most arduous parts of their migration journeys. In the next chapter, I move forward in time, away from the initial shift to an undocumented status, to explore how participants' narratives portrayed everyday life with an irregular status.

## **Chapter 5 Everyday life with an undocumented status**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I presented my interpretation of three participant narratives that illustrated different pathways into an irregular or semi documented status. In this chapter, I focus on Chinese migrants' experiences of everyday life subjected to an undocumented status in the UK. In doing so, I address the second research question underpinning this study: how did Chinese migrants experience everyday life with an undocumented status? Here, I intentionally focus on the narratives of three Chinese women to illustrate the intersection of an undocumented status with gender which, as noted in chapter two, was an under researched topic in the existing literature. I show how experiences that were specific to women participants, such as pregnancy, childcare, and gendered roles in Chinese restaurants and takeaways, converged with an undocumented status and shaped the daily lives of Chinese women. The first narrative, Yu Yan's story, is centred on precarious work and motherhood. The second narrative, Nian Zhen's story, is focused on the demands of the Chinese restaurant. Finally, I present Feng Mian's story in which parenting a child with a learning difficulty whilst being subjected to an irregular migration status led to an uneasy life. Like the previous chapter, I present the stories in long form, followed by my interpretative commentary. The chapter ends with a discussion of the commonalities between the stories and the connection with the full data set.

### **5.2 Precarious work and motherhood**

The first story is taken from Yu Yan's account of an undocumented life in the UK. The extract conveyed her experiences of being undocumented and unemployed, of tolerating

precarious employment and a surprising event in her story arc: becoming pregnant with twin daughters. When telling her story, Yu Yan frequently switched between the first person “I” (我) and the plural “we” (我们). In my interpretative comment, I discuss the potential meaning of this storytelling device.

### 5.2.1 Yu Yan’s (语嫣) story

I1: Could you tell me a little about your experience of work?

P: When I first arrived, I was unemployed for over six months. Because I had no status, employers did not dare to hire me. Later, introduced by a fellow villager, we were washing dishes in a restaurant for a while. But when the government began to check status more strictly, I was fired once again. Life was especially tense during that period of time. Even when I had a job, I was worried all day long, fearing that I would be fired by my boss tomorrow. So, I cherished every job I did. We were anxious that the boss would fire us if we did anything wrong. After working for a while, we were unemployed and homeless again. We were unemployed for almost a year. Hearing the police siren, we were rather panicked. Asking the way on the road, we were particularly nervous when we saw the police. There was a period of time when we were unemployed, but we also needed money to rent the house. So, we shared a room with others. Because there

were so many people, we had to sleep on the floor. We made a bed on the floor by putting a quilt on the ground. It was just a place to sleep, but we still had to pay.

Later, introduced by my fellow villager, I found a job doing handy work in a family take-away. The boss was also from my village, but he suffered from an emotional illness, a psychological illness due to his family relationships and he often got physical with me. At that time, I was really scared. He arranged for me to sleep in the basement garage, but I still felt that it's better to have a place to sleep than sleep out on the streets. Although the boss was a little mentally perverted, at least I could get my wage, as long as he didn't go too far, I would still hang in there.

But one evening when I was about to get off from work, he was agitated and in a bad mood and he wanted to beat me. I was very scared. I had worked in his restaurant for almost a week at that time. He asked me to cook the food because he needed to go out. I said I didn't dare to cook because I wasn't familiar with the food. I could only wash dishes, chop vegetables, and do some chores. Then he yelled at me, "Then why should I pay you?" "You must do it", he ordered. "I don't dare to. I'm afraid that I might mess up your business", I refused. Then he wanted to beat me, so I was scared. After I got off work that night, I fled without even taking a shower. I didn't understand anything at that time. I didn't even know where to find the road sign leading to the train station. I was just crying on the roadside. Not knowing which way to go, I squatted there helplessly.

Later, when people recommended jobs for me, because of my psychological shadow, I didn't dare to take specific jobs. Later, I realized I could not keep

hiding like this, or there would be no way for me to reunite with my child. So, in the end, I found another job doing chores.

Later, when I was with my husband, I accidentally got pregnant. At that time, I didn't dare go to see a doctor. I didn't know what to do. I worried that I would be sent back if I looked for a family doctor. In that case, the money I spent to come here to the UK would also be wasted. At that time, I was very worried. I was greatly stressed because of pregnancy. I had to share the rented house with others. And I felt very unwell during the pregnancy. But I dared not see a doctor. I just stayed at home all day long. Until the fourth month of pregnancy, I decided to see a doctor. When I went to see the family doctor and told him that I had been pregnant for four months, he was very nervous. He was shocked to know that I hadn't seen a doctor during the first four months of pregnancy. And I looked very thin. The next day we went to the hospital to do an ultrasonic examination. After having the examination, I was told that I had twin daughters. But the doctor told me that the foetuses were too small because of malnutrition. At that time, I felt extremely stressed. I had not yet earned enough money to repay the debt. Now I was pregnant, and the babies were a little malnourished. I didn't know what would happen once I gave birth to them. Throughout the pregnancy, I was in a state of depression, worrying about the babies in my womb and my son in China.

### ***Undocumented and unemployed***

Yu Yan's account of being undocumented was told through a series of short, episodic stories, drawn in vivid detail. The first of these episodes captured Yu Yan's experience of

moving in and out of short-term, precarious employment and homelessness during the years after her arrival in the UK. Yu Yan made sense of this period of insecurity through a construction conveying cause and effect; “Because I had no status, employers did not dare to hire me”. By using the phrase “did not dare” (不敢), Yu Yan acknowledged that the Chinese restaurant and takeaway owners for whom she had worked took a considerable risk as they would have been subjected to fines if found to be employing an undocumented migrant. Yu Yan realized that, in the light of this risk, she was an unattractive employee given that she had no skills or experience in kitchen work. Yu Yan’s only work experience prior to her migration was farm work and, as a girl in rural Fujian, she had attended only three to four years of formal schooling. Her only option was to seek low paid and poorly regarded “handy work” (“打杂的工作”, also used to mean “odd jobs” or “unskilled work”).

In the following sentence, Yu Yan explained that she was “introduced” by a “fellow villager” (“老乡”) to a job “washing dishes”. This is the first of many explicit references to fellow villagers in Yu Yan’s narrative. They were also referred to implicitly, as Yu Yan’s account moved between the first-person pronoun, “I”, and the plural pronoun, “we” to describe both her personal experience and the shared experiences of undocumented friends, colleagues and roommates: “*I* was unemployed”; “*we* were washing dishes”; “*I* was fired”; “*We* were anxious”. The fellow villagers in Yu Yan’s full account were not drawn in any depth, but they were framed as key characters, instrumental in helping Yu Yan to find work, apply for government welfare after the birth of her twin daughters, and to identify that she was suffering with postnatal depression and in need of support. However, the support of fellow villagers was limited. When “the government began to check status more strictly”, Yu Yan, again, lost her job.

In the next few lines, Yu Yan built in her narrative a connection between employment and accommodation, and their opposites, unemployment and homelessness. The setting of the narrative moved to the “road”, where Yu Yan, now unemployed and homeless, was “panicked” and “nervous”, hiding from police cars and frightened by the sound of police sirens. In this desperate situation, Yu Yan rented a small space on the floor of a shared room to sleep. When she explained, “We made a bed on the floor by putting a quilt on the ground”, Yu Yan’s use of concrete nouns (“bed”, “quilt”, “ground”) painted a vivid image of the inadequate housing she had endured. This was one of many accounts of poor and overcrowded housing in the set of narratives, as other participants described cramped, shared dormitories and rented rooms.

### *Tolerating risk in employment*

The next episode in Yu Yan’s story was set in a Chinese takeaway where she found work. Again, a fellow villager was instrumental in introducing Yu Yan to this opportunity to work for another fellow villager who owned a Chinese takeaway. Unfortunately, Yu Yan’s narrative quickly revealed that there were issues with her “boss”: “he suffered from an emotional illness, a psychological illness due to his family relationships.” Later in this section of the narrative, Yu Yan described his issues in stronger terms: he was “psychologically abnormal” (“心理上有一点变态”). Yu Yan linked her boss’ psychological abnormality with his behaviour: she explained “he often got physical with me”. The Chinese phrase Yu Yan used to describe his behaviour was “动手动脚”, which literally translates as “move hands, move feet”. It can mean “to take liberties”, “to paw”, “to grope” or “to come to blows”. In the context of Yu Yan’s story, it is not

clear if this phrase meant she was at risk of sexual or physical assault from her employer, or both. Perhaps Yu Yan did not know, either.

Next, Yu Yan described the accommodation she was offered by her boss: “He arranged for me to sleep in the basement garage.” The spatial relationship between the takeaway, the owners’ home and the basement garage where Yu Yan slept, was difficult to establish from her narrative, but in the wider data set, families who owned takeaways typically lived above their restaurants. I presume, therefore, that Yu Yan slept below the shop in an underground garage. This brief description conveyed a sense of darkness and suggested that Yu Yan’s employer would have easy access to her in this informal arrangement. In contrast with her repeated use of “we” in the earlier episode in her narrative, this story was told exclusively through the personal pronoun, “I”, suggesting that Yu Yan was alone, without the protection of others. Despite feeling “really scared”, Yu Yan made a decision: “as long as he didn’t go too far, I would still hang in there” (只要他不会对我太过分, 我还是会坚持的), as the alternative meant that she would be left destitute and homeless once again. Yu Yan’s story suggested that she was willing to tolerate significant personal risk to remain in employment.

In the next part of the story, the darkness evoked by the basement garage gained power and presence in the narrative as Yu Yan described a scene between herself and her employer that took place after work one evening. Yu Yan described the boss’ mood as “agitated” and, as a result, she explained: “he wanted to beat me”. Yu Yan’s use of reported speech when recalling the words exchanged in the argument suggested that the incident remained vivid in her memory. Having employed Yu Yan to do “handy work”, the boss then demanded that she cook. When she refused, he questioned, “then why should I pay you?” The exchange suggested that the employer was aware of the power he held over Yu Yan and that he could refuse to pay her wages, with no

consequence, if she did not meet his demands. Despite the takeaway owner shouting and ordering, “you must do it”, Yu Yan refused.

To escape this situation, Yu Yan used the only option available to her: she “fled” and made her way to the nearest train station. Although this was an exercise of agency, Yu Yan created a sense of helplessness in the next few clauses. She did not know where she was, or how to get to the train station. She could not find any signs, and she was left “crying on the roadside”. The scene created was bleak: it was dark, late at night, Yu Yan had little money, she was unwashed after her day’s work and she “squatting there helplessly”. This experience effected Yu Yan’s emotional health and left her with a “psychological shadow” (心理阴影) that deterred her from finding employment for some time.

### *An unexpected pregnancy*

In the final episode in the extract, Yu Yan introduced an unexpected event in her life story: her pregnancy. Yu Yan’s need for health care became a crisis as she “did not dare go to see a doctor” (不敢去看医生) due to fear that she would be “sent back”. Having paid a large sum of money to migrate to the UK, the prospect of being arrested and deported had real economic consequences for Yu Yan who would be unable to repay the loan if she were to return to farm work in her rural village in Fujian. Yu Yan felt forced to hide in her shared, rented home, perhaps sleeping on the floor as she described earlier in the narrative, whilst dealing with a pregnancy that made her unwell. Afraid to go outside, she “just stayed at home all day long”.

Sadly, this was not the first time Yu Yan had concealed a pregnancy. In her wider narrative, Yu Yan revealed that she did not seek healthcare in China during her pregnancy with her son. Instead, she hid from “place to place...rather than go to the hospital for regular antenatal

checks". Finally, Yu Yan "secretly gave birth to him at home" to avoid compulsory sterilization which, according to Yu Yan, was mandatory for women who gave birth to a boy in her village under China's One Child policy. The necessity to hide and the willingness to tolerate personal risk to evade state enforcement were well established in Yu Yan's life story before she left China for the UK.

When Yu Yan saw a doctor at four months, the story of her pregnancy became increasingly complex. An ultrasound showed that she was pregnant with twin daughters and that they were malnourished. Yu Yan explained, "I didn't know what would happen once I gave birth to them." This statement expressed a complex set of concerns which Yu Yan explained in greater depth in her full narrative. She was worried about: the health of her unborn children; how she would cope when the children were born; the impact of having children on her migration status; and the burden on her husband of providing financially for both their twin daughters and for their son in China. Her concerns were complicated by the fact that, if she were to return to China, she would face difficulties registering her daughters in China's household registration system and they would become "black" or "unregistered" ("黑户") in her village. Yu Yan had become trapped between two political systems that would not recognise her children.

Yu Yan's concerns about her family's future affected her inner life and this was the theme she turned to towards the end of the extract. She was "very worried", "extremely stressed" and "in a state of depression" during her pregnancy, "worrying about the babies in my womb and my son in China" (又担心肚子里的孩子,又担心国内的儿子). This final clause set up a contrast in terms of place: Yu Yan was physically close to her daughters, carrying them through gestation, and distanced by thousands of miles from

her son in China. She worried about her son growing up without his parents, and she was concerned about her daughters being undocumented children in both the UK and in China. Yu Yan had limited power to resolve either of these issues and the future of the family would depend on Yu Yan successfully navigating state systems of population control. Yu Yan's concern, coupled with her sense of powerlessness, resulted in severe postnatal depression and she recounted in her full narrative how her thoughts became preoccupied with suicidal and filicidal ideations shortly after the birth of her daughters. Eventually, Yu Yan and her husband made an application for leave to remain in the UK which, to their surprise, was successful and they were able to bring their son from China to live with them. This was a turning point for Yu Yan's mental health. She concluded her narrative by describing the difference that a regular status had made to her life: "Without status, we were living in darkness all day long. However, with status, we come to see the sunlight shining into our life." The darkness evoked earlier in her narrative was replaced by images of day and light.

### **5.3 The demands of the Chinese restaurant**

The next story is an extract from Nian Zhen's narrative in which she was preoccupied with her experiences of work in the co-ethnic economy in the UK. Like Wang in the previous chapter, Nian Zhen's husband was subject to a work visa which meant that the couple had to work for five years to regularise their status. As the spouse of a migrant worker with a work visa, Nian Zhen's status in the UK was closely tied to her husband's status. Nian Zhen's story illustrated the nature of work in a Chinese restaurant, the impact of work on family relationships and, finally, the need to face humiliation to survive in the workplace.

### 5.3.1 Nian Zhen's (念真) story

I1: Can you tell me a little about your experiences of work?

P: I didn't know anybody when I just came here. My husband is here, he works in the kitchen, and he asked the boss if I could work in the restaurant. I didn't know anything, so I worked in the bar, refilling the coke and red wine. But the boss didn't allow me to serve the customers. I just washed the glasses and refilled the beverages in the bar. And I endured five tough years there.

At first, my husband asked the boss if I could work for him, if he refused to employ me, then I would have no job and no place to live, and it would be very difficult. At that time, I also gave birth to a child. My son was only two and a half years old when I brought him to the UK. My husband came here half a year earlier than me. He made friends with those working together with him. So, he asked his friend's wife to help me look after our child so that I could go to work. At that time, I met my son once a week and I cried often. I hated to part with him. He's just too young. He was only two and a half when we came and he didn't know anyone here, neither did I. That's really a difficult time. And I was not used to eating the food here, I don't like Western food, I'm not used to eating bread and stuff like that that.

My husband had to work there for five years. At that time, the labour cost was very low, and we dared not say anything when colleagues quarrelled, because you had to work for the boss for five years if you want to get the identity. You had to go through that tough five years. At that time, we were often bullied by others, the labour cost was low, and you had to work long hours from 12 o'clock in the

morning to 12 o'clock at night, which was extremely tiring to do every day. You only had one day off every week. So, I missed my child so much at that time, for he's so young. I was also afraid that the language he had been born into was different from that of my friend. I only knew the language of my hometown and could not speak anything at that time.

I2: Do you speak Putonghua or dialect?

P: I speak dialect, Hakka. People from Fujian, Guangdong and Meizhou speak Hakka. We just had to endure it bit by bit. And we were often bullied by others. Sometimes when I got off work, I couldn't help crying because of the grievances I had to suffer, I cried and cried. My husband told me not to cry and said that everyone has the same experience. I felt my level of education was too low, I couldn't speak English, I couldn't read enough, I was unable to achieve anything because I hadn't received much education. So, I withstood all the hardships all the way until in 2012 when we got the identity. We came here in 2007, and we got our identities five years later in 2012. During the five years, we didn't go back to China. So, upon getting the identity, we went back to China. But later, there's something wrong between my husband and I, we didn't get along well, so we got divorced.

I1: Is there anything else about your experience of living in the UK that you want to share?

P: I just remember I was often bullied by others at work. As I started working at first, the wage was very low. It's only £70 per week...Foreigners will usually give waiters tips, right? My colleague had worked there for a long time. She insisted

that I was not supposed to take the tips because I couldn't do anything. And she kept saying in front of the boss that I should not take so many tips. The boss said my wage was low enough, and it's OK for me to take tips. Then she said she should take ten percent and she left only a small portion for me. We both lived in the dorm. Upon going back to the dorm, she started shouting at me angrily. But I was not good at quarrelling with others, so I was really scared of her. She said she was from Malaysia, and she was fierce. I was afraid of her. She's very aggressive. She kept scolding me. I couldn't bear it anymore, but I was afraid to fight back. I remember I just said, "The boss said it's OK, why do you think it's improper?" Since I was a new worker, I had to do lots of hard work like cleaning the toilet, washing the dishes and washing the quilts. She didn't have to do any of the physical work because she came earlier than me. She's responsible for taking orders and talking to customers. She always reproved me. I still remember that I cried all night that day. As I went to work in the morning, I still had to face her, and was embarrassed that I had to talk to her because of work. Because I couldn't speak English, whenever there's a customer coming in, I had to ask her to talk to the customer. So, I had to toughen the skin on my face, and I went over to her and joked. But, in fact, I cried all night that day. I remember I kept crying for a very long time, I really felt wronged. So, I still remember it now.

### ***Life in the Chinese restaurant***

Nian Zhen's narrative provided a detailed description of working life in a Chinese restaurant where many Chinese migrants, with a variety of statuses, made their living. In the narrative, Nian

Zhen recalled her husband's words, designed to comfort her when she was upset upon arrival in the restaurant: "everyone has this experience" (每个人都是这样的经历的). Indeed, Nian Zhen's account illustrated typical experiences of work in Chinese restaurants that were common in many narratives in the study. First, when asked about her experience of work, Nian Zhen's initial response was to explain that she "didn't know anybody" when she arrived in the UK. This statement suggests that, for Nian Zhen, employment and social networks were connected. Her husband, who migrated to the UK six months earlier, used his networks to arrange Nian Zhen's employment, which brought with it accommodation (another typical feature of restaurant employment). Nian Zhen acknowledged that, if her husband's boss had refused to employ her, life would have been "very difficult".

Nian Zhen's account also revealed the type of work that migrants undertook in Chinese restaurants and the skills that were valued by employers. Whilst her husband worked in the kitchen, Nian Zhen, who had no kitchen skills, undertook unskilled tasks such as refilling drinks and washing glasses in the restaurant bar and cleaning toilets and washing bedding for the shared dormitories where employees lived. These were common tasks for women with no experience of kitchen work. Narratives in the full data set also suggested that restaurant owners valued female employees' language skills. Those who spoke both Cantonese and English, the languages most often used by customers, were most desirable for front-of-house roles. Nian Zhen, like Yu Yan, had received little education in China, which left her with a low level of literacy. She spoke Hakka, a Chinese dialect, but she could not speak Putonghua, Cantonese or English when she first arrived in the UK. This meant that Nian Zhen, like several other women in the study, was at the bottom of the hierarchy established in Chinese restaurants. She was amongst the lowest paid and she was subjected to poor treatment by colleagues who were more highly regarded.

Nian Zhen's description of her working hours again resonated with all the accounts of work in Chinese restaurants in the data set. Participants who had worked in restaurants, like Nian Zhen, all described working 12-hour days, from 12 noon until midnight, with limited breaks and just one day off per week. The setting of Nian Zhen's narrative, told almost exclusively in the restaurant, suggested that fulfilling these working conditions meant rarely leaving the restaurant. Nian Zhen and her husband had "to endure five years" ("在那里熬了五年") in this way. To describe this period of endurance, Nian Zhen used the Chinese verb, "熬", which can also mean "to cook on a slow fire" or "to extract by heating". The verb has a temporal element that the English verb, "endure", conveys weakly. Nian Zhen's choice of language suggested that this was a time of suffering, over a protracted period, in an environment where the heat and the pressure were high. However, the image of extracting something valuable, namely, a regular status, through the application of heat gave meaning to this act of endurance.

Nian Zhen's story also suggested that work in a restaurant offered few opportunities to interact with non-Chinese people. Given that Nian Zhen could not speak English, she could not communicate with customers. The fact that she rarely left the restaurant meant that opportunities for language learning and adaptation to UK culture and society were limited. Interestingly, the Chinese language constructs that Nian Zhen used to refer to Westerners suggested a Chinese worldview. She used the term "foreigners" ("外国人" literally "outside country people"), and the derogatory term, "foreign ghosts" or "foreign devils" ("鬼佬") that can be traced back to the European colonisation of parts of China and Hong Kong. The reference to "ghosts" related to the resemblance of European skin tones to ghosts. These terms are commonly used in China and Nian Zhen's use of these language constructs suggested that the historical relationships between

China and the UK influenced her perceptions of others and perhaps enhanced barriers to social integration. Nian Zhen was constrained by both the physical barrier of the restaurant environment that she rarely left and, perhaps, by a linguistic barrier that shaped how she viewed others outside of the restaurant.

### *Separated from family*

The structure of work in the Chinese restaurant had a detrimental impact on Nian Zhen's family life. Her story of both physical and emotional separation from her son and her husband was interweaved throughout her account of her work experiences. First, Nian Zhen described the separation from her son that was necessary upon arrival in the UK. Unlike many of the women in the study who migrated to the UK alone, leaving their children with family members in China, Nian Zhen brought her young son with her to the UK. However, because of the "very tiring" nature of the work and hours expected, she was unable to care for him and her husband arranged for a colleague's wife (a stranger to Nian Zhen) to take care of him. She was only able to visit her son once per week on her day off.

Nian Zhen's description of her separation from her son conveyed both pain and guilt. She recalled how she "cried often" (那时候就经常哭) and "hated to part with him" (很舍不得他). She repeatedly stated that her son was "so young", "only two and a half", suggesting that his young age made the separation more difficult. Nian Zhen's statement, "I missed my child so much", (很想很想他), was stronger in Chinese than the English translation, as she repeated the verb "to miss" for emphasis (literally, "very miss very miss"). When she recalled this difficult time, Nian Zhen switched fluidly between her perspective and her son's perspective: "*he* didn't

know anyone here, neither did I.” Later, she explained “I was also afraid that the language he had been born into was different from that of my friend. I only knew the language of my hometown and could not speak anything at that time.” Aligning her own experience and perspective with her son’s made their separation seem both painful and unnatural.

Although Nian Zhen was reunited with her husband when she migrated to the UK, her description of the restaurant suggested that they spent much of their time separated. Whilst her husband worked in the kitchen, Nian Zhen worked in other spaces in the restaurant and they slept separately, in shared dormitories divided by gender. Having acquired status after five years, Nian Zhen explained, “there’s something wrong between my husband and I, we didn’t get along well, so we got divorced.” To convey the problem between them, she used the phrase “不和” which means “not harmonious” or “to be at odds”, “to be on bad terms”. The difficult five years that Nian Zhen initially framed as a period to endure, become a pathway into a new life in which her personal relationships were irrevocably changed.

### ***Conflict with colleagues***

Towards the end of the interview, when I asked Nian Zhen if there was anything else she wanted to add to her story, she elaborated on an incident of bullying that had a strong effect on her. This appeared to be an important vignette in Nian Zhen’s wider narrative as she had foreshadowed this story several times by referring to her experiences of bullying in the restaurant. Nian Zhen set the scene for this vignette by explaining that she had a disagreement with a colleague about her right to take customer tips. Nian Zhen’s colleague, who was Malaysian and (as revealed in the wider narrative) undocumented, was in a position of power over Nian Zhen. Her power came from both her experience and her language abilities: she had

worked in the restaurant for some years, she could speak both Cantonese and English and was therefore responsible for taking orders from customers (a highly regarded role for women).

Nian Zhen described the episode in three short scenes, each located in different spaces within the restaurant. The first occurred in front of the “boss”. Nian Zhen’s colleague repeatedly stated that Nian Zhen should not take tips because “she didn’t know anything”. Nian Zhen’s employer played a protective role in this scene, acknowledging that Nian Zhen’s wage was “low enough” and stating that she should be able to take tips. This scene took place in a public place in the restaurant where Nian Zhen benefitted from the “boss” adjudicating between the two women.

The second scene took place in a semi-private place in the restaurant: the shared women’s dormitory where both Nian Zhen and her colleague slept. In this scene, the “boss” was no longer there to adjudicate. When her Malaysian colleague shouted “angrily” at her, Nian Zhen had no private place to which she could retreat to escape the argument. Instead, she recalled how she “cried all night”, which is likely to have been visible and audible to her colleagues. Feeling embarrassed and wronged, with no escape, Nian Zhen stated: “I couldn’t bear it” (我受不了了).

The third and final scene returned to the public place of the restaurant where, having cried all night, Nian Zhen had to “face” (“面对”) her colleague because of her ability to speak to customers in the restaurant. This was humiliating for Nian Zhen, who had to “toughen the skin” on her “face” (“硬着面皮”). Nian Zhen’s use of this metaphor related the incident directly to the Chinese concept of “face” (面子), in which the maintenance of face is an important social attribute. Both Nian Zhen and her Malaysian colleague attempted to cultivate a public face to survive in the restaurant. For Nian Zhen’s colleague, stating that she was “fierce” and quarrelsome in both public and private areas of the restaurant allowed her to exert power over

Nian Zhen. Nian Zhen was able to joke in the public area of the restaurant, but the fact that she had no private place where she could drop her performance meant that this incident was a significant humiliation. Nian Zhen's final comment on this vignette, "I really felt wronged" ("很受委屈") was a passive construction in Chinese, which emphasised her powerlessness. Nian Zhen and her husband had no choice but to tolerate bullying. They "dared not say anything" through fear that speaking out would jeopardise the family's chances of acquiring status.

#### **5.4 An uneasy life**

The final story presented in this chapter is taken from Feng Mian's narrative account of her life in the UK. Feng Mian, a Fujianese woman in her late thirties, had lived in the UK subject to an irregular status for ten years at the time of her interview. The interview took place after a service at the Chinese church which was one of the sites of the study. In my interpretation of the narrative, I focus first on the ways in which an undocumented status intersected with other difficulties in Feng Mian's life, then on the support, both formal and informal, she was able to access and, finally, on her experience of waiting for up to a decade for a resolution to her application to remain in the UK.

##### **5.4.1 Feng Mian's (风眠) story**

I1: How does your status affect your life in the UK?

P: We have no status at the moment so there are many restrictions on us. We can't work. We don't even have a bank card, so it's inconvenient for us to buy

things. Anyway, it causes lots of inconveniences in our life. All of this has an impact on our lives, there's nothing we can do about it. The most important thing is that there is no way to live a normal life because I feel we will be discriminated against. Also, our English is not good, I really feel that we'll be treated unequally outside. Also, we have an older son in China, we have no way for our whole family to be reunited. This is the biggest difficulty. This is indeed the case. As we don't have status, we can't go back to China. We haven't seen our elder son in ten years, so this is us. In fact, there are many difficulties we have to face, maybe I can't think of them all now. In addition, because my younger child is a little bit special, he has to receive special education in a special school. Actually, I feel very uneasy here, because there's no one to help you. At least in China you may have relatives who can help you. But you don't have that here, you are alone.

I2: Your son was born here?

P: Yes, he was born here. We hope that we can get status as quickly as possible, but it is hard for us immigrants to get status now. But I don't know what to do either. I hope this interview can really help people like us. But we currently don't have status, we are refugees, so we get £100 a week to eat. But we can't receive, for example, disability benefits. If we had status, he could receive this sort of welfare. So, the financial burden is also a problem for us. Since we have no status, we can't learn to drive, nor can we get the driver's license. It is really difficult to take our son out. If we go from home to church, he will make trouble countless times. So, it's difficult to think of all the difficulties, and to talk about them all.

I1: When you run into difficulties, is there anyone you can ask for help?

P: Basically, I have some friends who can speak English, I will ask them for help. In the past, my son didn't have a social worker, but we are now applying for a social worker. We feel very helpless a lot of the time. We will often come to church; church will give us a lot of help.

I1: Have you ever tried to change your status?

P: Yeah, the lawyer, we once asked a lawyer for help. But it seems such a long time to wait, we have waited for so many years and we haven't had any news. We've urged the lawyer, but the lawyer says that there's nothing he can do either except urging the immigration office. But there's still no news. So that's it, we are waiting. We are in this state of waiting. So, we are waiting and I'm very anxious.

### *An undocumented status and other difficulties*

Feng Mian's narrative began with her listing the daily difficulties she experienced, all of which were exacerbated by an irregular migration status. Feng Mian's account resonated with the other women in the study, such as Jin and Yu Yan, who had followed their husbands who migrated some years before them, left children behind in China, and given birth to children in the UK. Again, like Jin and Yu Yan, Feng Mian was subjected to an irregular status for a considerable period of time – ten years at the time of her interview. However, a key detail that set Feng Mian's story apart from other women's narratives was the fact that her UK-born son had a specific learning difficulty. Her story, therefore, reflected the specific experience of mothering a child with additional needs whilst subjected to an irregular status. Therefore, the

constraints (限制) of an undocumented status that Feng Mian described – unable to work, no access to a bank account, unable to drive – exacerbated the practical, emotional and financial difficulties she experienced as the mother of a child with a learning difficulty. Being unable to drive, for example, was more than an inconvenience for Feng Mian who described how she struggled to keep her son safe and manage his behaviour when walking on the street. During the interview, I observed the difficulties Feng Mian experienced when trying to manage her son's behaviour, who was present at the church. He took an interest in the two audio recorders used to record the interview and began to take the batteries out of one of the devices. Feng Mian reproved him, and we agreed to cut the interview short as she was required to return her full attention to her son's behaviour and safety. I observed, first hand, Feng Mian's parenting stress and the additional parenting challenges she faced. With a tone of exhaustion, Feng Mian stated: "So, it's difficult to think of all the difficulties, and to talk about them all."

Like other mothers who participated in the study, Feng Mian described the separation from her family in China as her "biggest difficulty". She worried about her eldest son, 13 at the time of the interview, and she also lamented the loss of support from her wider family. She explained: "we have no way for our whole family to be reunited." The Chinese term for "reunited", 团聚, contains the character "团", which means "round" or "circular", and creates the image of a gathering of people in a circle. For Feng Mian, the circle was broken as the family remained separated for a decade.

Feng Mian also referred to the difficulties she experienced that were not caused by an irregular status alone but exacerbated by her migration status. For example, she listed her limited English language ability and fears of discrimination as concerns that weighed heavily on the

family and affected their daily lives in the UK. Together, these difficulties created the image of an uneasy life. As Feng Mian explained, “there is no way to live a normal life” (没有办法很正常地生活). This statement resonated with other accounts in the study, in which the idea of a “normal life” (“正常地生活”) was evoked as a standard that was unattainable for the narrator.

### *Between formal and informal support systems*

Given the additional needs of Feng Mian’s son, the family had sought both formal and informal support from social services in the UK and from informal networks at the Chinese church. Having applied for the right to remain in the UK, the family were in receipt of a limited range of benefits which amounted to “£100 a week to eat”, an amount that Feng Mian implied was insufficient to meet the family’s needs. She also explained in her wider narrative that the family were in the process of requesting support from children’s services to enhance their son’s wellbeing. Feng Mian did not state if her husband was part of the family’s application for the right to remain or the interactions with social services. Interestingly, it was common amongst other undocumented women in the study to present to services as single mothers. This allowed their husbands to continue to work ‘illegally’ in Chinese catering without attracting unnecessary attention from the Home Office. For this reason, female participants’ husbands often lived separately from their wives and children in accommodation provided by their employers rather than in social housing. This pattern represented an inversion of the construct of the ‘benefit-cheat’ in which migrant women withheld information about their husbands from services to enable them to work and to reduce the family’s reliance on welfare. This may have been a

necessity for Feng Mian and her family, given the limited financial and social support available due to their irregular migration status and the cost of parenting a child with additional needs.

Feng Mian also detailed the informal support to which the family had access, which largely came from the Chinese church. Through their attendance at the church, the family gained access to Chinese friends who spoke English and had knowledge of UK systems. As I outlined in chapter three, during fieldwork I attended the Chinese church regularly and developed research relationships with the Fujianese congregation and Fujianese pastor. I observed that, during Sunday services, the Fujianese members of the congregation gathered at the right-hand side of the circular church building. They socialised with each other before and after services whilst their children played together. Many families sought out the Fujianese pastor at the end of services for advice, often forming an informal queue by the font near the entrance to the church. Feng Mian and her family were part of this group and, like others in the study, they gained practical support, advice, social connection, and Christian fellowship through their membership of the Chinese church. However, a reoccurring theme in many of the narratives of churchgoers was that the support available was limited. Ultimately, the support from friends and leaders at the Chinese church had little effect on the migration status of the family. Later in her narrative, Feng Mian also lamented that, being separated from her wider family network, she was missing the support ordinarily provided by relatives. Drawing a comparison between China, where “you may have relatives who can help you”, and “here”, where “there’s no one to help you”, Feng Mian explained that she felt “alone”. Support from within the Fujianese community at the Chinese church did not compensate for the missing safety net usually provided by the extended family Feng Mian had left behind in rural China.

### *An anxious wait*

Whilst describing her life in the UK, Feng Mian used several evaluative clauses to explain the affective experience of living with an irregular status over a long period of time. She emphasised her limited agency to change the restrictions the family were subjected to: “there’s nothing we can do about it” (我们都没办法); “I don’t know what to do either”; and “We feel very helpless a lot of the time.” The Chinese term Feng Mian used to express her helplessness, “无助”, can also be used to mean “useless”. Feng Mian’s use of this term suggested that the multiple difficulties the family experienced, combined with her limited agency to affect change, detrimentally affected her sense of self.

Feng Mian also described her fear that her family would be subjected to discrimination in the UK. The way in which Feng Mian framed this fear was telling: rather than recounting specific experiences of discrimination, Feng Mian used the future tense, suggesting that her fears had not yet come into being. This framing perhaps indicated that the family did not put themselves in positions where they would experience discrimination. This was strengthened in her statement, “I really feel that we’ll be treated unequally *outside*” (在外面会受到不平等的待遇). As the interview took place in the Chinese church, Feng Mian’s reference to “outside” seemed to refer to life outside of the Fujianese Christian community. In comparison with the friendship, practical support and shared language and culture that the family had found through the Chinese church, ‘outside’ seemed to represent an inhospitable place where the family’s undocumented migration status, combined with their limited English, left them vulnerable to discrimination. Her situation left Feng Mian feeling “uneasy” and “anxious”. To express her

discomfort, Feng Mian used the phrase “很不安” which can also be translated as “unpeaceful”, “unstable”, “disturbed” or “restless”. Feng Mian’s circumstances left her unable to achieve peace or stability in her life in the UK.

Finally, when describing the family’s attempts to regularise their status, Feng Mian emphasised the time that had passed since they made an application for the right to remain: they had waited for “so many years”. She summarised these years through a powerful description: “We are in this state of waiting” (“处于这种等待的状态”), which suggested that waiting defined the family’s lives in the UK. The interview ended on a note of powerlessness: “So we are waiting and I’m very anxious”. Given the far-reaching impact of an irregular status on all aspects of Feng Mian’s life, her sense of helplessness in the face of protracted immigration processes created a muted frustration in her narrative, which resonated with other participants in the study.

## **5.5 Commentary**

The stories presented in this chapter captured commonalities in women’s experiences of everyday life subjected to an undocumented status in the UK. Although many of the experiences and emotions expressed in Yu Yan, Nian Zhen and Feng Mian’s stories were also found in men’s accounts of their lives, I selected these three narratives to convey experiences that were specific to undocumented Chinese women (an issue, as noted in chapter two, that has been under researched in the existing literature). In the discussion that follows, I draw together the commonalities in the narratives in this chapter to show how undocumented Chinese women’s narratives were: affected by pregnancy and mothering; shaped by the social and economic places

in which they spent their time; and, imbued with expressions of emotional distress which were closely tied to both their immigration status and their gender roles.

Yu Yan, Nian Zhen and Feng Mian's accounts of their everyday lives, like most of the women's' narratives in this study, were centred on their experiences of motherhood. Whilst immobilised by an irregular status, Yu Yan and Feng Mian worried about the children they had left behind in China. Pregnancy, as shown in Yu Yan's narrative, represented a time of crisis for undocumented women who feared that their need for antenatal care would result in their arrest and deportation. The cost of having children and the necessity to stop working with no maternity pay left Yu Yan worried about the financial burden of her pregnancy on her family. The household registration system in China meant that taking UK-born children back to China was administratively complex. The fact that Yu Yan and most of the other Fujianese women in the study were indebted to migration brokers in the early years after their arrival in the UK meant that a return to China was not possible. Therefore, women like Yu Yan became trapped: unable to work, unable to return to China, afraid to seek medical care and worried about how and when they would reunite with their children in China. Interestingly, Nian Zhen's story showed how the demands of work in the Chinese restaurant also necessitated separation from her son with whom she had migrated to the UK. Nian Zhen's narrative showed that migrating with family members did not protect migrant women from the pain of separation from their children or the potential transformation in family relationships brought about by the experience of an irregular status. In addition to these typical constructions of motherhood whilst subjected to an undocumented status, Feng Mian's narrative conveyed the difficulties experienced by mothers of children with additional needs. Despite legal provisions for all children, regardless of immigration status, Feng Mian expressed dissatisfaction with the formal support she had received to meet the needs of her

son. Her separation from wider family in China left her feeling alone, anxious and helpless in her parenting role.

Turning to the setting of the three narratives presented in this chapter, I noted that two important environments were described in depth: the Chinese restaurant and takeaway, and the Chinese church. These two narrative environments represented the economic and social places in which women in the study spent most of their time. For example, most of the scenes in Yu Yan and Nian Zhen's stories, and in the full data set, were set in Chinese restaurants and Chinese takeaways. This connection between plot and place underlined the importance of work in undocumented migrants' everyday life, a theme that was conveyed with strength in Yu Yan's account of being in and out of employment. Finding work and maintaining work was a major preoccupation of most of the narratives in the study (although the narratives of participants who had grown up into an undocumented status often pivoted on education, too). Workplaces in the Chinese catering industry were simultaneously presented as sites of: kinship ties; protection from destitution; and, in contrast: places of exploitation; bullying; humiliation and isolation. The nature of work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways was described uniformly, by Yu Yan and Nian Zhen in this chapter, and by both men and women in the full data set. Long hours, low pay, hierarchical staff relationships, and limited opportunities to leave the workplace or to develop English language skills were typical constructions of migrants' experiences of work. However, Yu Yan and Nian Zhen's stories provided insight into the specific experiences of undocumented women in Chinese restaurants and takeaways. Their narratives suggested that: undocumented women were valued less than men, they migrated with fewer employment skills, and they were often employed as a 'favour' to their husbands or because of hometown ties. Yu Yan and Nian Zhen's limited work experience and language abilities made them less desirable as employees

when compared with workers who had either kitchen or language skills. This meant that both women were forced to tolerate poor, and potentially abusive working conditions to maintain their employment. This experience was echoed in the wider data set where status was not the only determiner of employability in Chinese catering: the attributes of participants interacted with their immigration status to determine their experiences of work.

Aside from the work environment, the key social environment described in Yu Yan and Feng Mian's narratives (and in the narratives of other women in the study) was the Chinese church. In the narratives, the church represented a place of refuge from a potentially discriminatory 'outside'. In the church, women participants connected with others without fear, sought informal support and advice to address the difficulties they faced, and contributed to the life and work of the church through their membership and fellowship with others. The fact that Fujianese women in the study could speak in their regional dialect and connect their migration stories with others who had also experienced an irregular status meant that the church became an important site in many of the women's lives. The church perhaps represented a community in displacement where, away from the fear of unemployment, destitution, the concerns for children and the constant threat of deportation, women could connect with each other and feel at ease. Interestingly, none of the men who participated in the study were recruited at the Chinese church, nor did they discuss spirituality or church membership. Although I met male church members, I observed that the Sunday Fujianese congregation at the church field site was largely made up of women and children. The working patterns of Chinese men perhaps inhibited church membership, which added to a sense that the church was a gendered social place.

Despite the refuge that the Chinese church appeared to offer to undocumented women in the study, their experiences of mothering children, near and far, their precarious employment

experiences and their powerlessness in the face of immigration systems weighed heavily on their mental health. All three narratives in this chapter contained expressions of anxiety, chronic stress, exhaustion and helplessness. Worryingly, Yu Yan described how her post-natal depression left her with suicidal and filicidal thoughts after the birth of her twin daughters. Fear of deportation and limited knowledge about mental health meant that many women in the study were reluctant to seek help. The sense of helplessness and frustration expressed in Feng Mian's narrative was particularly salient given that there was no clear escape from the "state of waiting" that defined her life and no satisfactory help for the daily difficulties she faced as an undocumented mother of a child with a learning difficulty. As discussed earlier in the chapter in relation to Yu Yan's narrative, it was common for participants to tell their stories through plural pronouns, which suggested that many experiences of day-to-day life in the UK were shared with family members and fellow villagers (老乡). However, when recounting their most difficult memories, such as Yu Yan's need to flee from an abusive employer during the night, Nian Zhen's altercation with her colleague, and Feng Mian's account of mothering a child with additional needs, women participants told their stories with singular pronouns. Thus, in their most vulnerable moments, women in the study were alone to face their day-to-day difficulties and fears.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how an undocumented status shaped the everyday experiences of Chinese women in the UK. Whilst many of the difficulties articulated by women were features of men's stories, too, (such as issues related to employment, housing, healthcare, family

relationships and access to support), the three narratives presented in this chapter were selected to shed light on gender-specific roles and experiences. For example, I have outlined how women's experiences as mothers were affected by both the constraints of an irregular migration status and the demands of work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways. I have also shown how women's employment prospects were affected not only by an irregular status, but also by their gender and skill level. Importantly, the three narratives presented in this chapter provided insight into the emotional worlds of undocumented Chinese women, which were characterised by fear, helplessness and isolation. The narrators' emotional distress was exacerbated by the length of time that Yu Yan, Nian Zhen and Feng Mian were subjected to an irregular migration status. In the next chapter, participants' allusions to time and waiting are salient themes that I examine in depth in relation to undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences of the status journey over time.

## Chapter 6 The status journey over time

### 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that an undocumented status shaped the everyday lives of Chinese migrants and exacerbated other forms of vulnerability and social disadvantage for undocumented Chinese women in particular. In this chapter, I focus on an under-researched aspect of undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences: the status journey over time. By deploying the term, 'status journey', I refer to the processes through which migrants move from irregular to temporary and regular statuses. These shifts in status may occur over many years. Furthermore, the status journey is not necessarily linear: migrants may move in and out of irregular and regular statuses. Nine of the thirteen participants in this study had lived in the UK for more than ten years. Over this extended period, they had all encountered immigration authorities, some by choice and some through circumstance, and made efforts to regularise their status. In this chapter, I present three stories which represent different phases in migrants' journeys toward a regular status. The first narrative, Yellow Flower's story, represents the experience of applying for a regular migration status. The second, John's story, typified how an extended temporary status shaped migrants' opportunities and identities. Finally, Fei Hong's story shows both the security that permanent residence brought to his life, whilst representing the limits to Fei Hong's integration and belonging in the UK. In the commentary at the end of this chapter, I present my interpretation of the key themes that connected these three stories and others in the data set: *waiting* and the *passage of time*; *safety and security*; and, *identity, integration and belonging*.

## **6.2 Applying for a regular migration status**

The first narrative, Yellow Flower's story, was centred on the experience of making multiple unsuccessful applications for the right to remain in the UK. Although many participants in the study had applied for a regular status and received a refusal, Yellow Flower's story was distinct because she could afford to make multiple applications and appeals to the Home Office in quick succession. Yellow Flower's narrative also conveyed a detailed understanding of the application process and knowledge of immigration law and policy which she was able to develop due to her grasp of English and level of education (she had been educated to master's level). In contrast, most participants had migrated with large debts owed to family members, no understanding of English and very limited knowledge of immigration law or policy which made it practically difficult for them to apply for a regular status. This meant that applications for the right to remain were often made years after participants shifted to an undocumented status. However, the emotional effect of receiving repeated refusals conveyed with strength in Yellow Flower's story resonated with other accounts in the study. In my interpretation of Yellow Flower's narrative, I focus first on her claim for the right to remain, then on her experience of repeated refusals and no right to complain, and, finally, on her helpless wait for an outcome to her applications.

### 6.2.1 Yellow Flower's (黄花) story

I: So, can you tell me your story?

P: I suffered one year here, for since last April<sup>2</sup> I have my private problem then I started to apply for my visa. My passport has been in the Home Office since August. I have no freedom. I can't get out from England. I have to pay everything myself. I can't claim anything. I have to work very hard, I still do voluntary work, I pay my rent, everything, very very difficult. But I'm not lazy and I don't want to claim anything. And maybe the only wrong thing is that I should live in China, I shouldn't have come here.

I: Could you tell me your experience of applying for status?

P: The solicitor helped us. This is the legal way. So, I feel that is good, the legal way. But the Home Office refused me. But we know they just refuse everybody, this is the way. Then they want you to appeal, you have to pay. First, I paid £1,500 for our application. Then, they refused me, and I spent £900 again to appeal. Then, they refused me, we appealed, then they just cancelled my old visa till 2019. That means we are nothing. We have nothing. No passport, nothing. Every time you get Home Office letters, you are crying. The words are very hard, they hurt. Even if you are sick, you can't go to the hospital, you have to pay. We will only give the passport to you if the Home Office police come to your home, take you, go to the airport. When they see you go to the plane, they give the

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<sup>2</sup> The interview took place in July 2017. At the time of the interview, Yellow Flower had been subjected to an undocumented status since April 2016.

passport to you. You see, we are human beings. They think we are criminal. We do nothing wrong [crying]. You feel very very sad. So, every time I found the Home Office letter I don't want to open it. And my solicitor says, "we will appeal, and I will write a complaint letter". And then they refuse me again. The letter is very hard, it said "we don't accept your complaint". It means you even haven't the right to complain, they totally ignore you [crying].

I: We've already started to talk about it, but could I ask how your migration status affects your life?

P: It's a big change. Changed my life in fact, totally. Since this thing happened, immigration way happened, I went from a very safe five-year visa, become nothing in my hand. Everything, you can't control anything. You can't control it yourself. Somebody, like a switch, they switch this part, you die, they switch this part, you are alive. I go to the court, I can see the Home Office solicitor, straight face, I'm very nervous, my son is very nervous, I just look at him, what he's doing. If he decides no, cross, then we die. So. your life is very weak, like fly ants, you can easily be killed by people. It is very very helpless; you feel no help. This is why I dig my potential, everything, all my potential. I've found I have a big problem. I have to sort this problem. But this problem in fact is private, but they link with the Home Office, the immigration, that's why I have a big problem for me. Every second, every minute, every night, I have this pressure. I can never breathe easily, and I am always thinking how about this week or next week, when I get the result, if I get a good result from the judge. I am always thinking about the judge. Every second I think of my case, the Home Office, I cry.

The “Home Office”, the two words in my mind, have already become very sensitive words, make me feel sad. How do you define it, “移民” [migrant], the word. “移民”, “migrant”? I’m a migrant today, and also, I’m not yet. This is my feeling.

### *A claim for the right to remain*

Yellow Flower’s narrative was centred on her construction of why and how she had claimed the right to remain in the UK. Almost one year prior to the interview, Yellow Flower’s spouse visa was invalidated when her husband disappeared. Three years prior to the interview, Yellow Flower had migrated to the UK with her 15-year-old son, after meeting her husband online. By the time her husband had disappeared, Yellow Flower had spent most of her life’s savings and was left with an irregular status. She described this situation as her “private problem” which caused a “link with the Home Office”. This construction of the invalidation of her visa conveyed two implicit messages: first, that Yellow Flower was a victim of circumstances; and second, that the involvement of immigration authorities at the point of Yellow Flower’s marriage breakdown was an intrusion of her privacy. Yellow Flower described the effect on her life in simple terms: she had “suffered one year here” because of her “private problem”.

Next, Yellow Flower made a more explicit claim about her right to remain in the UK when she declared “I’m not lazy and I don’t want to claim anything”. Yellow Flower positioned herself as hardworking and willing to learn and develop herself in contrast with “lazy” migrants who were reliant on state welfare. In the extract above, the repetition of “I” and “I have to”, followed by a verb - “*I have to pay everything myself*” / “*I have to work very hard*” / “*I still do voluntary*

work” / “*I pay my rent*” / “*I dig my potential*” - created an image of an active narrator who had been forced to use the resources available to her to survive with an irregular migration status.

In her narrative, Yellow Flower also connected her claim for the right to remain with the material and emotional resources she had invested into her life in the UK. For example, she recounted the total amount of personal savings, acquired from the sale of her home in China, she had spent in the process of applying for the right to remain: a total of £4,200 at the time of the interview. Additionally, in her full narrative, Yellow Flower stressed the emotional investment she had made in her long-term future in the UK. Since arriving three years earlier, Yellow Flower had completed a teacher training programme, undertaken various voluntary roles and contributed to the cultural life of her community through engagement with local events and festivals. Yellow Flower’s claim for a regular migration status also turned on her conception of her response to her husband’s disappearance as morally and legally proper. In the wider narrative, Yellow Flower explained that she could have chosen not to declare her change of circumstances and continued to live in the UK for the two years remaining of her five-year visa. However, she wanted to act in the “legal way”. Therefore, she reported at a local police station to declare that her visa had been invalidated. This was the beginning of her long journey toward a regular status.

From this construction of herself as a ‘deserving migrant’, Yellow Flower then reflected on the morality of her migration to the UK. She explained, “maybe the only wrong thing is that I should live in China, I shouldn’t have come here”. This was the first of several instances in the wider narrative in which Yellow Flower evaluated her own migration on moral grounds. In certain utterances, she emphasised her victimhood at the hands of her husband who she believed had married her for financial gain. At other points in her interview, Yellow Flower

acknowledged that her marriage to an EU national was part of a strategy based on multiple motivations to migrate to the UK. Yellow Flower seemed aware that the simple version of her story, in which she was framed as the victim of an exploitative online marriage scheme, would be viewed more favourably than her complex narrative: that she migrated both for marriage, and, to broaden the opportunities available to herself and her son.

Regardless of how she was viewed, Yellow Flower wanted to express her more complex narrative: “The man cheat me, ask money. Yes I want to go abroad, but *they* just use very simple way to understand. But we [migrants] are complicated.” Yellow Flower’s use of the pronoun “they” appeared to evoke a “ghostly audience” – not physically present in the interview, but part of the narrator’s construction of her story - of potential judges of her migration immigration status journey (Langellier, 1999, p.444). This ‘ghostly audience’ included immigration officials, acquaintances, and UK society in general. Other participants also implicitly evoked audiences who existed beyond the research interview when they evaluated their own applications for a regular migration status. Joanne, for example, a Fujianese woman in her 30s, judged her application for asylum pejoratively: “I know I’m not [an] asylum seeker, but I did the asylum seeker [application]. That’s not very good, I know, not very good, that is not true, I know”. Like Yellow Flower and Joanne, most participants evaluated the legitimacy of their claims for the right to remain in the UK against discourses in which ‘illegal migrants’ were framed as immoral or deceitful.

### ***Repeated refusals and no right to complain***

At the time of her interview, Yellow Flower had received three refusals from the UK Home Office in relation to her application for the right to remain in the UK. The first refusal did not

deter Yellow Flower. She explained that she anticipated a negative outcome: “they just refuse everybody, this is the way”. This attitude reflected both the advice of her lawyer and what she had learnt about the process of regularisation from other migrants. Yellow Flower became increasingly anxious after she appealed the initial decision and her appeal was not upheld. However, the negative outcome of her application and subsequent appeal accounted for only part of Yellow Flower’s distress. The way in which she had been constructed by immigration authorities was another significant source of pain expressed through her narrative. Yellow Flower explained: “we are nothing, they think we are criminal”. This official construction of Yellow Flower and her son was contained in the letters they had received from the Home Office, which took on a special significance in her narrative. She explained of the letters: “Every time you get Home Office letters, you are crying. The words are very hard, they hurt.” The way in which the Home Office had constructed Yellow Flower was unrecognisable to her. When Yellow Flower’s first official refusal contained incorrect details about her life, she made a formal complaint and felt hurt by the response: “The letter is very hard, it said ‘we don’t accept your complaint’. It means you even haven’t the right to complain, they totally ignore you [crying].” These official documents failed to recognise Yellow Flower’s story and she had no recourse to correct the record. The significance of correspondence from immigration authorities in Yellow Flower’s story resonated with other narratives in the study in which Home Office letters were met with dread. Both the (mostly negative) outcomes that such letters communicated, and the language of policy discourse contained in the letters, constructed migrants’ lives in ways that they did not recognise. In contrast with the official Home Office framing of her life, Yellow Flower asserted her own sense of self: “we are human beings. We do nothing wrong.” In my field notes, I recorded that Yellow Flower began to cry at this point during the interview. Her

assertion of herself against the official construction of her was both an effortful and an emotionally difficult act.

### *A helpless wait for an outcome*

The unexpected change of status, which caused Yellow Flower's "five-year visa" to become "nothing", left her feeling powerless. She lamented, "Everything, you can't control anything. You can't control it yourself." Yellow Flower conveyed a sense of powerlessness in the face of immigration processes by evoking three short scenes. First, she explained, "Somebody, like a switch, they switch this part, you die, they switch this part, you are alive". The actor in this short scene, referred to as "somebody" and "they", was unknown to Yellow Flower. The inconsequential act of flicking a switch had far reaching implications for Yellow Flower who described the outcomes in life-or-death terms: "you die" or, the alternative, "you are alive". Next, Yellow Flower evoked the courtroom where her appeal of the Home Office rejection for the right to remain was heard: "I go to the court, I can see the Home Office solicitor, straight face. I just look at him, what he's doing. If he decides no, cross, then we die." Again, the main character in this brief scene was the Home Office solicitor, an unknown actor who held power over her future in the UK. His decision, to accept her appeal or not, was constructed in an arbitrary way through the image of him marking a cross. Finally, Yellow Flower used vivid descriptive language to suggest her powerlessness in the face of the immigration system: "your life is very weak, like fly ants, you can easily be killed by people". Again, the actor in this scene was an anonymous "people" with significant power over Yellow Flower's life. Although a return to China did not pose a threat of death or persecution to Yellow Flower and her son, a negative

outcome from the immigration hearing would mean death to her current life in which she had invested all her financial and emotional resources.

This sense of powerlessness in relation to the immigration system, and the anonymous yet powerful actors within it, was exacerbated by the temporal element of the regularisation process. Yellow Flower described her one year wait for an outcome to her application for a regular status as a period of trauma which had a deleterious effect on her emotional health. The rhythmic repetition of the word “every” in Yellow Flower’s description of her wait – “Every second, every minute, every night” - conveyed how her life, like Feng Mian in the previous chapter, was dominated by waiting. For Yellow Flower, the emotional effect of waiting for an outcome from the Home Office manifested in physical symptoms. She explained: “I can never breathe easily” as her thoughts were preoccupied with wondering if she would “get a good result from the judge”.

At the end of the extract, Yellow Flower reflected on the significance of the words “Home Office” and “移民” or “migrant” in her story. She explained that the two words, “Home Office”, had become “sensitive” words that triggered an emotional response from her. The power of these words seemed to lay in both the way in which the Home Office had constructed Yellow Flower and her powerlessness to communicate her own construction of her migration story to the actors in the immigration system. The final sentences addressed this conflict as Yellow Flower asked how to define the word “migrant”. Her own understanding of the term, based on the Chinese “移民”, which translates literally as ‘move person’, had positive connotations that related to adventure, opportunity and learning. However, Yellow Flower’s understanding of herself was challenged by the official construction of her as an ‘illegal migrant’, a label associated with

criminality and immoral conduct. Yellow Flower waited not just for the outcome of her status application, but also to become a “migrant” according to her own interpretation of the word.

### **6.3 A disappointing acquisition of a temporary status**

The next story is taken from John’s account of the acquisition of a temporary legal status: limited leave to remain. John migrated to the UK with his mother at the age of eight. When his mother’s work visa expired, John, along with his mother, shifted to an undocumented status. However, John did not feel the effects, nor was he fully aware that he was subjected to an irregular status, until he applied for college and realised that he did not have the personal documents required to complete the college entrance application form. John applied without these documents and was accepted to the college without further questions. At this point, John’s understanding of his legal status began to develop, and he realised that his hopes of attending university were dashed. I have selected an extract from John’s story which began with a general question about his educational experiences as it was this point in the interview when John began to describe his status journey. In the narrative that follows, John recalled: his experience of acquiring limited leave to remain; the effect of being subjected to an extended temporary status; and the shift in his identity that occurred on his journey to regularisation. My interpretation of John’s story is focused on these three themes.

#### **6.3.1 John’s story**

I: Can you tell me about your experiences of school and college?

P: When I was studying in college, I'm having the status thing. I wasn't allowed to stay in the UK actually [laughs] so I'm not allowed to work. No workplace will take me except my auntie's chip shop because, you know, family, won't say, so nothing happens. It's really difficult to find work and I think it's really difficult for you to search for help because you don't know what you can say, how it can affect you. What I'm afraid of is if I ask for help, they find out what status I am in, they might kick me out of the college, or maybe they kick me out of the world. So, I just don't get help, I just deal with whatever I got.

I do worry about it, if I am getting my permit. I do worry about what I'm going to do and, what's going on. But luckily I get it. It's not really that much of a difference because all I got is the permit to live here with no support. No public funding. So, I still can't go to uni [laughs] cause I can't afford it. I got used to it now. Nothing change, I don't cause trouble, I always following the rules. And that's it.

If you want to work, it's difficult. But it's easy back two, three years ago. People don't check that much, but since last year, there's loads of people going round and checking. That's really scary. If I got caught or my mother got caught, we're going back, and I really don't want to be going back. I have family here, I have my girlfriend in here, I have friends in here. I know if I'm going back to Hong Kong or China, I'll be helpless. I don't know how things work back there, I don't have a place to live, I don't have the money. I'd probably just sit in the street.

I heard the place that I work now, government sent people to go into that place and they check for everyone's ID, check for their status. One of my friends, he's got no permit and he hid in the fridge for three hours. Loads of people I know got caught. Actually, I'm a bit worried right now as well. I got the permit; doesn't mean I'll get to stay forever. It only allows me to stay two and a half years. And my lawyer told me last month that I need to earn £18K a year to be able to continue to live here, to have my permit extended. So, it's two and a half year, two and a half year, two and a half year and two and a half year. That's ten year[s]. Ten year[s], then I can apply for eight year[s], and then I can apply for permanent [status]. And then I can apply for British [citizenship]. So, it's a long time.

I: Are there any times or places when your migration status feels less important?

P: Maybe before you're 16. When you're young, you don't really care. I can still play games, I can still buy a milkshake, I can still get my doughnut, I can still go to school without worrying. Maybe I could have got it [status] since I was 16, then I could have planned it out better. But once I'm over 18, I like to pay for my own rent and stuff like that. I don't get much of a choice because I need money. If I don't get paid, then I won't be able to live. That's it. I think I missed a couple of chances, but you don't know what happens next.

### *From an undocumented status to limited leave to remain*

John's status journey began in college when he began to feel the effect of an irregular status on his life and plans. John began, "When I was studying in college, I'm having the 'status thing'. I wasn't allowed to stay in the UK actually". As a child, John had rarely experienced the legal and social constraints of an undocumented status as he was protected, to an extent, by legal provisions for children. Like Sarah whose story was presented in chapter four, John grew up into an undocumented status and his emerging awareness of his irregular migration status developed between ages 16 to 18. When, at 22 years old, John's application for the right to remain was successful, he was surprised to learn that he was granted only a temporary status. John was placed on the ten-year route to citizenship in which he was required to apply for the right to remain every two and a half years, with the associated legal and application fees. This long-term route is reserved for individuals who do not have the requisite language skills or financial capital to qualify for the five-year route to citizenship, but they do have a legal claim, based on human rights legislation, to remain in the UK. John had long hoped for an end to the status insecurity that had defined his formative years but being subjected to an extended temporary status left him shocked about the minimal effect on his life. The 'no recourse to public funding' condition that had been applied to John's status meant that he could not attend university or receive welfare. As John explained, "I got the permit, doesn't mean I'll get to stay forever". The repetitive structure of John's description of the citizenship journey that lay ahead of him emphasised the protracted timeframes involved: "it's two and a half year, two and a half year, two and a half year and two and a half year. That's ten year[s] then I can apply for British [citizenship]". The acquisition of limited leave to remain was just the beginning, rather than the end, of John's status story. John explained: "It's not really that much of a difference because all I got is the permit to live here

with no support. No public funding. So, I still can't go to uni cause I can't afford it [laugh]".

John's laugh at the end of this sentence appeared to mask his disappointment about the gap between his expectations and the reality of his status journey.

The long gap between John's realisation that he was subjected to an undocumented status (aged 16) and his acquisition of limited leave to remain (aged 22) can be understood with reference to John's reluctance to seek help. When John began to describe his "status thing", a sense of fear and uncertainty seeped into his story. He explained: "What I'm afraid of is if I ask for help, they find out what status I am in, they might kick me out of the college, or maybe they kick me out of the world". John's use of an anonymous "they" seemed to refer to professionals at his college and to an ambiguous construct of immigration officials. His rhetorical jump, from being excluded from college, to being removed from the world, suggested that his fear of exclusion cut across many aspects of his life. John was aware that his status would affect not only his education and employment, but also the life he had grown to know which was firmly rooted in the UK. For this reason, John explained: "I just don't get help, I just deal with whatever I got". Although John had an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins in Greater Manchester on whom he could rely for informal employment, his narrative suggested that they were unable to help him in his journey to a regular status. From this note of discord between John's imagined life and the reality of his present, John returned to the present day: "I got used to it now. Nothing change." John seemed to have adjusted his expectations to his new reality. To conclude this part of his narrative, John stated: "I don't cause trouble, I always following the rules. And that's it." This statement seemed to connect with wider discourses about undocumented migrants' deservingness. In an implicit response to these discourses, John made his claim for the right to

live in the UK based on his behaviour. John presented himself as a ‘good migrant’, who expected little and abided by English laws and behavioural norms.

### *Extended temporariness and employment*

As a migrant subjected to a temporary status, with no recourse to public funds, John, like most participants in the study, was wholly dependent upon work in Chinese catering to survive. Although he dreamed of a better job, “working with English people in a proper company”, he was restricted to informal jobs in the co-ethnic economy and he depended on family members to source work: “No workplace will take me except my auntie’s chip shop because, you know, family, won’t say, so nothing happens.” John had also found part-time work in a Chinese restaurant. His preference for several part-time roles rather than a full-time role was, he explained, designed to avoid questions about his legal status. When he described work in Chinese restaurants, the sense of fear that was part of John’s college experience began to dominate the narrative as John recalled the difficulties involved in maintaining employment due to his status insecurity. John created an image of work in Chinese restaurants in particular as high risk because of a recent increase in immigration raids. In comparison with the past, when “People don’t check that much”, John explained that recently there were “loads of people going round and checking” and “loads of people got caught”. John referred to stories he had “heard” about immigration raids on Chinese restaurants, including a brief scene regarding a friend who “hid in the fridge for three hours” to escape arrest during a raid. John’s description of raids, although filled with fear, suggested distance: he did not seem to have experienced a raid first-hand. The language John used, such as “getting caught”, “checking” and being “sent back”, had a colloquial quality that diverged from official terms, such as “arrest” and “deport”, and created

the image of restaurant and takeaway workers exchanging stories of raids during shifts. The exchange of such stories was referred to in other narratives in the study. They created a sense of fear for both employees and employers which exacerbated John's status insecurity and his fears about his future.

Although John had the right to work at the time of the interview, he was not immune from the fear created by immigration raids because his status journey was far from over. For John, the potential consequences of getting "caught" during an immigration raid or failing to move through the stages of the ten-year route to citizenship, were unthinkable. He feared "being sent back" and established a strong contrast between his life in the UK and an imagined life if deported to Hong Kong or China. In the UK, John described a life of connection and familiarity: "I have family here, I have my girlfriend in here, I have friends in here." This contrasted with the image of a destitute and desperate life in Hong Kong: "I'll be helpless. I don't know how things work back there, I don't have a place to live, I don't have the money. I'd probably just sit in the street." John's emotional response to the threat of deportation was expressed through the evaluative clauses interweaved through this part of his narrative: "that's really scary", "I really don't want to be going back". Interestingly, this appeared to be an abstract rather than a concrete threat for John which perhaps exacerbated his fears. He was unsure if he would be deported to Hong Kong or to China. Having left his home in Manchester on just one occasion to return to Hong Kong to settle his deceased father's affairs, John could not visualise a life anywhere other than the UK.

John's emerging understanding of the route to regularisation also created insecurity in his narrative. Like many participants in the study, he was dependent on conversations with his lawyer to understand the requirements of immigration law and policy. John recalled a recent

conversation with his lawyer which, at the time of the interview, appeared to weigh heavily on his mind: “my lawyer told me last month that I need to earn £18K a year to be able to continue to live here, to have my permit extended.” John was referring to the legal requirement that migrants have a minimum income level of £18,600 per year to apply for British citizenship. John’s inability to attend higher education or to acquire experience or skills in sectors that offered a higher income than his part time roles in Chinese restaurants and takeaways was a source of concern. The constraints of an extended temporary status, therefore, left him vulnerable to ongoing status insecurity. John did not dwell on these topics during his interview, as he appeared to find them difficult to hold in mind.

### *A shift in identity*

When asked if there were times or places when John’s migration status had a lesser impact on his life, John answered that, before he turned 16, he neither thought nor cared about status issues. John evoked his younger self as a separate protagonist in his narrative, with childlike interests, such as “games”, “milkshake” and “doughnut[s]”. The young John could attend school, his life rarely diverged from his peers, and he was financially supported by his mother. He was not weighed down by his insecure status, excluded from education or fearful of deportation, like the present-day John.

This reflection on John’s childhood prompted him to express regret that he did not regularise his status earlier in his life. John understood that, if he had regularised his status as a child, he may have been able to access better opportunities for education, training and employment. John framed this regret as personal. He refrained from blaming his mother, his teachers, or the state (although in his full narrative John explained that he received poor legal advice when he first

applied for leave to remain). Instead, he used first person pronouns: “*I* could have got it” and “*I* missed a couple of chances”. Returning to his present-day, John explained that, unlike his younger self, he had limited options. This John was required to support himself financially which meant continuing to work in Chinese restaurants or takeaways, despite his awareness that this meant low pay, long hours, few prospects for advancement and a constant fear of immigration raids. The distance between the two protagonists, John’s younger self, and the present-day John, created pathos in the narrative.

John concluded his discussion of the opportunities he had missed with a statement expressing a positive and open attitude towards his future: “you don’t know what happens next.” This pattern, whereby John described the limitations of his irregular status and suggested the possibility of change, reoccurred in the narrative and perhaps acted as a strategy of self-preservation to help John to manage the long journey to citizenship that he could not be sure he would complete.

#### **6.4 Permanency on the margins**

The final narrative in this chapter is taken from Fei Hong’s account of his 13 years in the UK in which he described the journey from work visa to permanent residence. Fei Hong was from Tianjin, in his 50s and lived in the UK with his wife and son. Having arrived in the UK subject to a work visa, he shifted to an undocumented status temporarily when he decided to leave the employer who sponsored his visa and find work elsewhere. At the time of the interview, Fei Hong had acquired permanent residence and he had been joined in the UK by his wife and son. I interpret Fei Hong’s story in relation to three key themes: a regular status and

economic stability; the construction of identity as a permanent resident; and partial social integration which Fei Hong described as being on the ‘outside’ of ‘your British centre’.

#### 6.4.1 Fei Hong’s (飞鸿) story

I1: When did you come to the UK?

P: I came here in 2004. At the beginning, I worked as a chef for others in the Chinese food industry for about five or six years. After that, I opened my own Chinese restaurant. I’ve been cooking Chinese dishes for the past 13 years. When I first came here, there were very few authentic [Chinese] restaurants. There were all so-called ‘Chinese restaurants’ opened by Hong Kong people. But this kind of Chinese food is specially made for the British, so I don’t think the food is authentic. There were almost no authentic Chinese restaurants in 2005. We were the first authentic Chinese restaurant in the northern region at that time. But now, Chinese restaurants can be found here and there in the UK. However, in the past, there were few restaurants making authentic Chinese dishes like us. Only the Malays offered the hot pot, but they did the southern style hot pot. There was no authentic hot pot until we came here and opened our restaurant. Before 2005, Chinese food was all about curry and satay Hong Kong people custom-made for the British.

I2: How do you and your family find life in the UK?

P: They've basically got used to the life here now, for they've become accustomed to the rhythm of life here after living here for so many years, and they don't have to face as much pressure as they have to in China. If you have a stable income, you can have a stable life. It's the same everywhere. China is developing rapidly now. Sometimes we go back. Compared to when I first went abroad, China is now developing very very fast. There are more opportunities in China than here. But we've already been in the UK for more than ten years and we are basically used to the life here. We decided not to go back to China. Life here is incomparable with life in China, right? Every aspect of life in China is very good. Life here in the UK is kind of dull, because my Chinese circle is small, and the outside world cannot integrate into your British centre. It is rather dull in terms of entertainment and life, yet we are basically used to it after so many years. But the social circle is relatively small.

I1: So, when you first came to the UK, you came alone, and later, your family joined you. How did the change affect your life here?

P: When I first came here, I did not know the language and I didn't know many people. It was very depressing, and I planned to go back to China for a while. But, through my family arriving here, through my son going to school here, the family were reunited. At that time, I had a regular job, then I started my own business. My heart was more at ease, so I relaxed a little. I could say that I was here to accompany my child to school. Little by little, I forgot about those upsets [of the earlier years in the UK]. I slowly integrated into the life here. There is no

other way. When you arrive in a place, you have to integrate, right? After integrating, it is relatively stable now, and it's ok.

I1: Do you have friends in the UK?

P: Yes, but they are all our Chinese, in our Chinese circle. They come from all over China. Some of them come from northeast China, some from Sichuan. Wherever they come from, in foreign countries, they are your fellow countrymen as long as they are Chinese, right? Although they are not from one place in China, when you are overseas, Chinese people are all like a family.

I1: What are some of the difficulties you have faced in the UK?

P: Let's take language as an example. The people I have contact with are all in our Chinese circle, they are mostly chefs or doctors of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Their English skills in China are very poor, especially chefs. To become a chef, you have to first work as an apprentice. Chefs have gone through arduous training and hard work in the catering industry since they were young children. They are definitely not good at English, and they find English more difficult to learn. Their circle of friends is small, they have very little contact with the outside world. It is true that language is the first problem to be solved for people who come to the UK. Once the language problem is solved, problems in many other aspects will be naturally resolved. When I first came here, there were some things I couldn't adapt to. But, naturally and gradually, we got used to the life here.

### *A regular status and economic stability*

The extract above typified the key themes of Fei Hong's narrative: throughout his interview, Fei Hong preferred discussions about his experience as a Chinese chef and restaurant owner over questions about his status journey. The prominence of these themes perhaps reflected the fact that Fei Hong's progression from a waged worker to a business owner was a turning point in his life in the UK. This move was made possible when Fei Hong acquired permanent residence. However, the acquisition of a permanent legal status appeared to be secondary in Fei Hong's narrative, compared with the primacy he placed on his economic stability. Although permanent residence gave Fei Hong legal membership, his ability to earn a decent wage, and to take control of his time and his labour, were transformative. Additionally, the arrival of Fei Hong's wife and son marked a change in his emotional experience. In Fei Hong's telling, being reunited with his family appeared to erase the difficulties of the years following his arrival in the UK, which were rarely mentioned in the narrative apart from a brief reference to being "very depressed" (挺苦闷的). Fei Hong described this change in his emotional state with a figurative phrase: "my heart was more at ease, so I relaxed a little" (心就比较踏实了, 就把心放下了). This translation captured the approximate meaning, but there are multiple possible translations of this phrase which, although awkward in English, contain different shades of meaning. Possible translations include: "my heart became steadier / free from anxiety / firmly based, so I let it go / I put it down". These alternative translations evoke a more visceral image in which Fei Hong, initially, dared not relax. The image of him placing his heart down on the ground when his family arrived suggested the beginning of a sense of belonging. The arrival of Fei Hong's family also gave his migration story renewed meaning: "I could say that I was here to accompany my child to

school". Having originally migrated to earn money with a plan to return to China, furthering his son's education became Fei Hong's new purpose.

### ***Constructing identity as a permanent resident***

The prominence of "authentic" (正宗) Chinese dishes in Fei Hong's story seemed to converge with his negotiation of his identity. Fei Hong's description of his mastery of authentic Chinese cooking and his awe-filled descriptions of contemporary China suggested that he viewed himself as Chinese: the acquisition of permanent residence in the UK had not changed Fei Hong's construction of his nationality. Fei Hong commented in the wider narrative that, despite being eligible to apply for British citizenship, he had decided against it as he did not want to "forget" that he was Chinese, nor did he wish to revoke his Chinese citizenship (我不想把中国国籍给它忘了). However, Fei Hong's identity was not only constructed with reference to China, but also in relation to the UK-Chinese population. Whilst stating his claim to mastery of authentic Chinese dishes, Fei Hong was implicitly disparaging of non-mainland Chinese groups in the UK whose food he described, by contrast, as non-authentic. He compared the authenticity of his own cooking with the "Hong Kong people" and "the Malays" and described their UK businesses as "*so called* Chinese restaurants" (所谓的中餐). With a tone of disdain, Fei Hong described the food served in such restaurants as "custom made for the British", including "curry" ("咖喱") and "satay" ("沙跌"). The Chinese terms for both these food types are transliterations which emphasises that these dishes did not originate in China. Fei Hong framed the practice of customising dishes for British tastes as inferior in comparison with his own practice of cooking

authentic dishes for mainland Chinese students who represented the majority of his customer base. Through this discussion of food and cooking, Fei Hong distanced himself from non-mainland Chinese in the UK and portrayed a sense of superiority in his adherence to an authentic Chinese culture and cuisine.

Interestingly, Fei Hong's narrative showed that his commitment to authentic Chinese cooking was related both to his cultural identity, but also to economic opportunities. Since arriving in the UK 13 years prior to the interview, Fei Hong had witnessed a significant increase in the number of mainland Chinese students. This change in the makeup of the UK-Chinese population afforded Fei Hong the opportunity to open a restaurant near to a university with a significant intake of mainland Chinese students. In his wider narrative, Fei Hong explained the relationship between his business and the local university: during university exam periods, his profits increased as Chinese students visited the restaurant to eat and celebrate together. Fei Hong and his family also made use of the university holidays when most Chinese students returned to mainland China, allowing Fei Hong to close the restaurant for several months at a time to visit relatives in China. In this context, Fei Hong's commitment to cooking authentic Chinese dishes had multiple meanings: it was an expression of his mainland Chinese identity; a way to differentiate himself from non-mainland Chinese in the UK, and a response to the economic opportunities available to him.

### *On the “outside” of “your British centre”*

Fei Hong's narrative followed a linear progression in which his life had gradually and steadily improved over time. He told a story with a straightforward plot, in which he and his family had become accustomed to the “rhythm of life” (“生活节奏”) in the UK. The adjectives

“smooth” (“平稳”) and “steady” (“稳定”) were repeated several times throughout Fei Hong’s narrative, which created a sense of stability. Several phrases in the extract referred to the passing of time (“after so many years”, “little by little”) which worked to gloss over the “upsets” of his early years in the UK. At the end of the above extract, Fei Hong described his story of adaptation to life in the UK with a chengyu (成语, a Chinese four-character idiom): 自然而然. The chengyu means “naturally and involuntarily”. Fei Hong stressed that his gradual adaptation over time was the only available option: “There is no other way. When you arrive in a place, you have to integrate, right?” (到一个地方, 必须得融入它). The direct translation of the Chinese term ‘integrate’ (融入) can mean ‘to melt’, ‘to blend’, and ‘to merge’. The term connotes a conception of integration as a two-way process: when melted, blended or merged, two or more elements are mixed together, and the properties of each are transformed.

Despite Fei Hong’s positive portrayal of his adaptation to life in the UK, his narrative suggested that his integration into the mainstream of UK society was limited. For example, Fei Hong explained: “Life here in the UK is kind of dull, because my Chinese circle is small”. The Chinese term he used to describe his “dull” life was “枯燥” which is made up of two characters: “枯”, which means withered (used to describe plants), and “燥”, which means ‘dry’ or ‘parched’. Despite Fei Hong’s assertion that he had friends from all over mainland China whom he counted as family when overseas, he rarely socialised except for occasional gatherings during public holidays. His description of his working life, based on 12-hour days, six days per week, with only his wife and son to help, accounted, in part, for the limited social opportunities available to Fei Hong.

In addition to having a small circle of Chinese friends, Fei Hong briefly alluded to the barriers he had faced in attempts to integrate into mainstream society: “the outside world cannot integrate into your British centre” (外界融入不到你们英国当中去). The change in pronouns was noticeable here as Fei Hong switched from describing “our Chinese” (“我们中国”) to “your British” (你们英国), which suggested that he viewed the two groups as distinct. Fei Hong did not elaborate on this point any further, but this construction suggested that he had experienced resistance or racism in his attempts to fully integrate into life in the UK. Fei Hong also implied that his poor grasp of English, combined with the long working hours required to run his business, limited his ability to socialise with those outside of his small social circle of Chinese friends. According to Fei Hong, chefs, like himself, had few opportunities to learn English, either before or after their migration. To describe the training that most Chinese chefs underwent, Fei Hong used another chengyu (Chinese idiom), “摸爬滚打” (literally, “to feel, to crawl, to roll, to strike”), which means “to go through arduous training or hard work”. Fei Hong’s use of this idiom emphasised his high regard for the training undertaken by chefs from a young age and the skills they developed. Such training, he suggested, precluded the serious study of English which meant that chefs had no background on which to build when learning English in the UK. Combined with this background, the structure of work in Chinese catering also prevented meaningful integration. As Fei Hong explained, “The people working in Chinese restaurants and kitchens are all Chinese. They use Chinese to talk to each other and they have very little contact with the outside world.” The roles available to Chinese migrants in the ethnic enclave, combined with the types of education and training for these roles that migrants are likely to have undergone in China, created structural barriers to language learning and likely placed significant limits on

integration. Therefore, although Fei Hong had acquired legal membership of the UK, and achieved economic integration, his social integration lagged behind.

Yet, despite not being socially integrated in the UK, a return to China was not part of Fei Hong's or his family's plans. Fei Hong was aware that living in China would offer more opportunities, better entertainment and greater connection with friends and relatives, but he had decided to stay in the UK because his family would not have to face "as much pressure" as they would face in China. Fei Hong explained that his hometown in China had become unrecognisable to him because of the pace of urbanisation and the increase in high-rise buildings. He described with awe the advancement of high-speed rail, claiming "China is really a strong country now" (中国很强很强). Other participants described similar attitudes towards the pace of development in China since their migration and articulated the difficulties they would face if they attempted to reintegrate into contemporary Chinese society. Participants worried that: they would face barriers to re-joining the economy in China; and their children would struggle to compete with their peers in Chinese schools after experiencing a more 'relaxed' form of education in the UK. For this reason, after acquiring permanent residence, returning to China was not an option for Fei Hong, despite his belief that: "Life here is incomparable with life in China, right? Every aspect of life in China is very good." For Fei Hong, and other participants, there seemed to be no straightforward path back to China.

## **6.5 Commentary**

Each of the narratives presented in this chapter represented a different phase of the status journey. Although Yellow Flower, John and Fei Hong were each at different phases in their

status journeys, their stories were connected by commonalities in both their experiences and their constructions of themselves and their lives. In the discussion that follows, I comment upon three key themes in relation to Yellow Flower, John and Fei Hong's experiences: *waiting* and *the passage of time*; *safety and security*; and *identity, integration and belonging*.

Given that I focused in this chapter on migrants' experiences of the status journey over time, it is perhaps unsurprising that *waiting* and *the passage of time* were key threads that connected Yellow Flower, John and Fei Hong's stories. For Yellow Flower and John, the experience of waiting for a regular migration status dominated their narratives. The nature of Yellow Flower's wait was conveyed as an urgent and all-consuming experience. She was desperate to hear the outcome of her recent application for the right to remain and she struggled to think beyond that official decision. In Yellow Flower's narrative, the passage of time was experienced as slow, as she ruminated on the Home Office decision: "Every second, every minute, every night". John's story, too, was shaped by the experience of waiting, but of a different sort. Rather than the urgent and suffocating waiting conveyed by Yellow Flower's narrative, John was suspended in a state of extended temporariness. The ten-year route to citizenship left him in a condition of long-term legal limbo. The open-ended nature of John's wait for citizenship constrained the economic and social opportunities available to him and weighed heavily on his mind throughout his interview. A thread that connected both Yellow Flower's urgent wait and John's open-ended waiting was the sense of powerlessness that both participants experienced in the face of the immigration system. Both participants were aware that their future in the UK was out of their control. In contrast to the corrosive effect of waiting in John and Yellow Flower's stories, the passage of time was portrayed as a positive force in Fei Hong's account. For Fei Hong, the eight years that had passed since he acquired permanent residence had gradually erased the difficulties of his

early years in the UK. With a regular migration status, Fei Hong and his family had been able to find a new rhythm of life in which they found safety and security.

The sense of *safety* and *security* that Fei Hong emphasised in his narrative aligned with another key theme that connected all three of the stories in this chapter: the connection between psychological safety and a permanent, regular migration status. It was clear from Yellow Flower's narrative that the process of applying for the right to remain and receiving multiple refusals left her feeling unsafe and insecure. Her use of language and imagery related to life and death created the impression that she was in the midst of an ontological crisis in which her future, and that of her son's, hung in the balance. Similarly, John's deep insecurity about his place in the UK, the country in which he had spent most of his life, was conveyed with strength. The ontological security he had experienced during his childhood in the UK, in which he imagined progressing to university alongside his peers and obtaining a professional job, had been replaced with an insecure present and an ambiguous future. For Fei Hong, the acquisition of permanent residence was a turning point in his narrative. The image of him releasing his tight grip on his heart when he became a permanent resident of the UK showed the importance of a regular legal status as a foundation for psychological wellbeing. Interestingly, it was clear from Fei Hong's account of his status journey that legal membership of the UK alone was not the defining factor in his wellbeing. Rather, it was the effect of a regular status on Fei Hong's work, family life and his sense of autonomy that brought peace and stability to his story.

The final theme that connected the narratives of Yellow Flower, John and Fei Hong was the effect of the status journey on migrants' *identity*, *integration* and *belonging*. In Yellow Flower's account of the process of applying for the right to remain, she explicitly drew on discourses related to 'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrants to frame herself as a legitimate candidate for a

regular status. John, more implicitly, alluded to his conduct in the UK as a ‘good’ migrant to soothe his fears that he would be “kicked out” of the UK. John’s story also expressed a fundamental shift in identity, brought about by the long-term effect of being subjected to a temporary status. This shift was expressed in his narrative through his evocation of two protagonists: the younger, unburdened John and the present-day John, preoccupied with status concerns and trapped in legal limbo. This identity shift resonated with the stories of Sarah and Z, the other participants in the study who had migrated to the UK as children and subsequently experienced undocumented status as part of their transition to adulthood. Additionally, in my reading of Yellow Flower and John’s stories, both had been mis framed and misrecognised by the UK Home Office. Against the backdrop of this mis framing, both participants negotiated their own identities. For example, Yellow Flower expressed frustration with the way in which her complex and multifaceted migration story had been understood. John, too, had been mis framed by the Home Office when the condition of ‘no recourse to public funds’ was added to his leave to remain. This condition was designed to protect the welfare system from being used by temporary migrants, but John was not a temporary migrant. He felt little connection with Hong Kong, his place of birth, and had built his life entirely in the UK. In this respect, he was a citizen-in-waiting, yet his temporary migration status misrecognised his legitimate claim, on human rights grounds, for citizenship. In these allusions to identity in the narratives, both Yellow Flower and John, like other participants in the study, grappled with how their sense of self had been challenged by their interactions with immigration systems.

For Fei Hong, his narrative showed how permanent residence had afforded him legal and economic integration, but his social integration remained limited. Fei Hong’s ability to experience social integration was prohibited by both biographical factors, such as his English

language ability and prior education, and by the work he was able to access in the UK economy which demanded that he spent most of his time within Chinese social circles. He also alluded to racism and resistance within British society, which created further barriers to the integration of Fei Hong and his family. Due to these barriers, Fei Hong appeared to articulate an ambiguous sense of belonging in which he simultaneously identified as a Chinese citizen, whilst he negotiated an identity on the margins of society in the UK. This expression of belonging was complicated further by Fei Hong's regretful claim that he could not consider a return to China because the passage of time had placed him and his family out of sync with the speed of development in contemporary Chinese society.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

The stories presented in this chapter provide insight into the status journey migrants experienced, often over long periods of time. From Yellow Flower's application for the right to remain, to John's ten-year temporary status, through to Fei Hong's experience of permanent residence, the stories show how different phases of the journey toward a documented status may be experienced. The fact that Yellow Flower and John's status journeys had not ended at the time of their interviews shows that migrants do not necessarily experience a linear journey from undocumented to documented. Instead, the stories in this chapter trace the complex processes involved in the acquisition of a regular status in the UK, which included: refusals, appeals, unexpected legal conditions, and both urgent and open-ended periods of waiting. For Chinese migrants who had acquired a permanent legal status, such as Fei Hong, both biographical and structural issues led to partial integration, an ambiguous sense of belonging and a picture of permanence on the margins of society. By attending to the emotions expressed in Yellow Flower,

John and Fei Hong's narratives, I have shown the affective dimensions of migrants' interactions with immigration systems and the various (il)legal categories to which they were designated. In the next chapter, I draw together my interpretation of participants narratives, presented across chapters four to six, to explore Chinese migrants' experiences of undocumented status through the lens of liminality.

## **Chapter 7 Liminal status, place, and time**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the key themes presented across the three findings chapters with the aim of connecting the subjective experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants with the cultural and structural factors that shaped their lives. To achieve this aim, I draw on the concept of liminality and place this concept into dialogue with understandings of place and time as experienced by migrants. By deploying these theoretical tools, I describe undocumented Chinese migrants' liminal social condition. I begin by discussing the concept of liminality and its application in migration literature. I then discuss the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in relation to three constructs: liminal law and status; liminal social and economic places; and liminal time. Whilst presenting my theorisation of the study, I also pay attention to gender which, I argue, intersected with participants' experiences of liminality in different ways in both their sending and receiving contexts.

### **7.2 Liminality in the migration literature**

To conceptualise the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants, I use the anthropological concept of liminality, which originated in van Gennep's work (1909) and was subsequently developed further by Turner (1969). In van Gennep's work, *The Rites of Passage*, he coined the term 'liminality' to refer to an in-between phase between social roles or identities. He argued that individuals in many cultures pass through rites of passage where their identities and roles are changed (e.g., birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood, old age, and death). In each of these transitions, he identified a threefold structure through which the transitional person moves;

first, the pre-liminal stage which involves ‘death’ to an old life or role and a change of routines and social practices; next, the liminal stage, which involves passing through a threshold between social roles or social boundaries; and finally, the post-liminal stage in which the identities and roles of the pre-liminal fall away and the individual takes on a new social role, having been integrated back into a social structure. The person passing through the liminal phase is separated from their previous state but not yet integrated into a new social structure and van Gennep emphasised the ambiguous nature of this liminality and the identity change that took place in liminal phases. In Turner’s ethnographic study of the Nmbai (1969), he developed the concept of liminality further, describing the conditions and the experience of the liminal phase and liminal people (liminal personae) in detail. Where van Gennep emphasised the ambiguity of this stage, Turner conceptualised liminality as a positive and creative condition where the individual was released from social structure. In both conceptualisations, liminality was a bounded period, through which individuals passed as part of rites of passage in the life course.

The concept of liminality has drawn interest from migration scholars who have used liminality to describe the spatial, social, and legal conditions of irregular migrants. Coutin (2005), for example, in her ethnography of the clandestine journeys of undocumented Salvadorian migrants to the US, conceptualised migrants’ transit across borders as a liminal state. During these illicit journeys, Coutin argued that migrants were most vulnerable as they were forced to inhabit dangerous and hidden places and routes that were not designed for human travel. When migrants arrived in the US, Coutin found that their physical presence, but legal absence as undocumented migrants, left them feeling “invisible or not solid” (p.201). Coutin’s attention to clandestine migration routes and migrants’ affective responses to their lack of legal status on arrival in the US revealed the spatial and emotional dimensions of liminal states in

migrants' lives. Similarly, Chavez's (1991) study of undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants in San Diego, drew on liminality to understand migrant incorporation in the US. He understood the period from when an undocumented migrant exited their sending country, up until the migrant acquired US citizenship, as a liminal period. Chavez's argument was based on two important propositions. First, that the liminal period had no fixed end point: and second, that despite migrants' sense of belonging to the community, they remained on the 'outside' due to their undocumented status and the views of the receiving society, both of which blocked migrants' integration.

Interest in the concept of liminality to describe the *legal* condition of undocumented migration began with Menjivar's (2006) study of extended temporary legal statuses in the US, which she understood as a form of "liminal legality" (p.999). She argued that this "gray area", between legal and illegal could become a permanent state which had deleterious effects on migrants' family and social lives (p.1000). Drawing on this work, Gonzales (2015) inverted Menjivar's concept of 'liminal legality', by coining the term "legal liminality" to conceptualise the specific socio-legal experiences of undocumented young people who "transition[ed] to illegality" as they grew into adults in the US (p.9; p.11). Together, these studies demonstrated how, unlike van Gennep and Turner's understanding of liminality as a distinct phase with an endpoint, liminality has been used by migration scholars to point to an open-ended experience of temporariness, which has legal, place-based, and affective domains.

In this chapter, I build on the literature in relation to irregular and temporary migration statuses by deploying the concept of liminality to describe the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants. I categorise the forms of liminality identified in the narratives produced in this study under three headings: liminal law and status; liminal social and economic places; and

liminal time. In his 1969 text, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*, Turner outlined the characteristics of liminality. In doing so, he offered a series of binary oppositions to describe the difference between liminal states and their opposite, social structure. Amongst this list were the following binary pairs: “silence / speech”, “acceptance of pain and suffering / avoidance of pain and suffering”, and “heteronomy / degrees of autonomy” (Turner, 1969, pp.106-7). In the discussion below, I draw on these antithetical pairs to describe the liminality identified in the narratives of undocumented Chinese migrants. I also suggest that the creative potential of liminality, as described by Turner, was constrained by the restrictions created by an irregular migration status. However, despite these constraints, Chinese women’s descriptions of the Chinese church showed glimpses of creativity and freedom from social structure.

### **7.3 Liminal law and status**

As discussed above, van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969) understood liminality as a bounded state or period. However, in my interpretation of the narratives in relation to law and status, I found that Chinese migrants experienced liminal legal categories not as a bounded period, but as an open-ended status. This finding resonated with the work of migration scholars who developed similar arguments about migrants from different national groups (see, for example, Menjı’var’s discussion of “permanent temporariness”, 2006, p.1001). However, my interpretation diverges from the existing literature in that I also found expressions of liminality in participants’ accounts of their lives *before* migration, and *after* the acquisition of a permanent, regular migration status. To advance this argument, I first apply the concept of liminality to the range of legal statuses that Chinese migrants were subjected to in the UK. Next, I suggest that liminal legal statuses were an everyday experience for some participants *before* they migrated to

the UK due to the relationship between Chinese nationals and the state. In this respect, being subjected to a liminal legal status was not a new experience for some participants, but a continuation of legal and status inequalities experienced in China. Then, I argue that gender intersected with liminal legality to create varied experiences for men and women.

### **7.3.1 Liminal legal statuses in the UK**

All participants in this study experienced a form of liminal legal status where their immigration status was “betwixt and between” legal categories (Turner, 1969, p.95). All of those who migrated from Fujian province and arrived irregularly in the UK spent several years with no legal citizenship status vis-a-vis the UK government. They had experienced territorial liminality as they moved across borders and left an old way of life in rural China (or a pre-liminal phase) to enter a new way of life in urban areas in the UK (Chavez, 1991). However, despite being physically present in the UK, working and living out their daily lives, they were, in effect, legally non-existent during the early years after their arrival (Coutin, 2005). However, being undocumented was not a static or fixed legal status category. All the Fujianese migrants who had arrived irregularly subsequently became known to the UK Home Office, either through choice or through circumstance, and they were all in the process of applying for (or had already acquired) a regular immigration status. Most remained in a condition of “liminal legality” (Menjívar, 2006, p.1000): no longer officially undocumented, but not yet granted the right to remain in the UK. Van Gennep’s threefold structure also applied to participants who migrated to the UK as children and grew up into an undocumented status as they reached 18 years of age. Migrants’ lives in the UK before they became undocumented, sometimes spanning their entire childhood, can be described as the preliminal phase. The preliminal phase was a time of

innocence when migrants were not yet burdened with the legal restrictions imposed upon them by the transition to an undocumented status. The liminal phase began when migrants' immigration status shifted, and they became undocumented. The postliminal phase began when participants acquired permanent residence, although for all participants who grew up into an undocumented status, this had not yet been achieved at the time of their interviews. They were, instead, subjected to protracted, temporary legal statuses on pathways such as the ten-year route to citizenship, with no recourse to public funds.

Participants who were subjected to a time-bound work visa may have, formally, had a more stable legal status, but the narratives in the study demonstrated that they shared similar experiences of status insecurity and precarious employment with those subjected to an undocumented status. Unlike undocumented migrants who could look for alternative work, those subjected to a work permit experienced exploitative working conditions in Chinese catering and they were unable to complain or challenge their working conditions or wages through fear of displeasing their employer who held power over their immigration status. Therefore, the five-year work visa represented another form of liminal legality, where the temporary and contingent nature of migrants' legal status was experienced as highly stressful and traumatic.

### **7.3.2 Liminal legal statuses in China**

Although I have conceptualised the acquisition of an undocumented status in the UK (either due to the crossing of a border, coming of age without legal status, or the expiry of a visa) as a liminal phase, there are also aspects of Chinese citizenship which can be understood through the lens of legal liminality. In the discussion that follows, I argue that participants' experiences of liminal legal statuses in China shaped their understanding of and responses to the shift to an

undocumented status in the UK. To elucidate this argument, I present two key characteristics of Chinese citizenship; the relationship between Chinese nationals and the state; and the differentiated legal statuses to which Chinese nationals may be subjected. The term ‘citizen’ has no direct translation in Chinese (‘公民’ meaning ‘national’ and ‘市民’ meaning ‘city people’ are perhaps the closest parallel terms) and has been found to hold little meaning for Chinese migrants (see Zhang, 2020). For this reason, I focus on the relationships between the individual and the state in China and the ‘legal statuses’ available to Chinese nationals. However, for efficiency and style, I occasionally use the term ‘citizenship’ to refer to these relationships and legal arrangements.

Whilst Western, liberal notions of citizenship have centred on the reciprocal nature of rights bestowed by the state and duties enacted by citizens, the relationship between Chinese nationals and the state has been described as communitarian with an emphasis on obligations rather than individual rights (Janoski, 2014). Janoski (2014) argued that Chinese notions of citizenship are partly explained by the history of governance in China where the rule of the Emperor, and later the Chinese Communist Party, although not total, mandated obedience from Chinese subjects and discouraged active engagement. The Chinese people’s acceptance of this communitarian model may be partly explained by the influence of Confucianism which emphasised social order, social harmony and filial piety and continues to influence Chinese nationals’ relationships with others and with the state (Janoski, 2014).

An understanding of the historical evolution of the relationship between Chinese individuals and the state can shed light on the motivations and priorities of undocumented Chinese migrants in the study. Participants who migrated to the UK with the intention ‘to earn money’ (‘赚钱’)

(such as Jin whose narrative is presented in chapter four) expressed limited interest in acquiring social or political rights during her early years in the UK. Jin prioritised access to work to enable her to send money to her family in Fujian: first to pay off the debt she had acquired to migrate and, second, to improve the lives of her family members. Jin's obligation to support her family seemed to be rooted in her position as the eldest of her siblings, which may reflect a modern expression of Confucian ideas about filial piety (孝) and family structure. Whereas filial piety in traditional, Confucian societies meant that women provided physical care for their in-laws whilst men provided financially for their own parents, Jin's method of fulfilling her family obligations inverted this tradition. She was physically absent from both in-laws and parents yet focused on enhancing their lives through remittances. It is also important to note Jin's socioeconomic context: Jin was from the countryside where welfare was limited. Her desire to support her family financially through her migration project may have been a necessity of the structural circumstances of her family, rather than an expression of Confucian values. Although Jin was in receipt of social housing from the UK government at the time of her interview, her preference was to be granted the right to work to support herself and, in return for this right, she would contribute to the economy through taxation. Jin's initial disinterest in pursuing a regular immigration status and her prioritisation of economic rights to allow her to fulfil her familial obligations may reflect a Chinese understanding of the relationship between individuals and the state. Or, alternatively, it might reflect economic necessity.

For participants in the study with a rural hukou (户口, household registration) in China, their experience of legal liminality in the UK was preceded by experiences of unequal and liminal legal statuses in China. In contemporary mainland China, Chinese nationals are subjected to

unequal legal statuses due to the hukou which determines where an individual can live and the social rights they can access. An individual's hukou status is based on their parents' residence, which can be either urban or rural and is tied to specific localities. Whilst individuals with a rural hukou have land-use rights, those subject to an urban hukou have traditionally benefitted from enhanced access to healthcare, education, pensions and property rights (Johnson, 2017). These differentiated legal statuses have led to different classes of citizens in China. Although the hukou system was historically enacted as a form of population control, China's economic reforms and opening-up policies have offered opportunities for millions of Chinese nationals with rural hukous to move to China's major cities to improve their economic standing. However, once in urban areas, individuals with non-local hukou status experience lower social rights compared with their counterparts with urban, local hukous and they are unable to access healthcare, property rights and education for their children. Internal migrants are known informally in China as the 'floating population', (流动人口) a title which suggests a liminal legal status, betwixt and between rights entitlements. Three participants with rural hukous (Meng, Zhan Fang and Yellow Flower) migrated internally within China and therefore spent time as members of China's floating population with limited access to rights in the urban areas in which they worked and lived. For these participants, the shift to an undocumented status in the UK was not a wholly new experience, but rather a continuation of past experiences of not being fully equal in terms of citizenship.

### **7.3.3 Gender and liminal legal status**

In both China and in the UK, migrants' experiences were shaped not only by their liminal legal statuses, but also by the intersection of liminal legality with gender. Migrant women who migrated to the UK as adults made the journey from China to the UK to follow a spouse, both documented and undocumented, unlike migrant men who often had hometown connections in the UK but migrated alone. Those who had acquired a spouse visa (Yellow Flower, Meng, Nian Zhen and Zhan Fang) were dependent on their husbands' legal status which meant they were unlikely to leave their husbands (a finding which resonated with a study of Chinese migrant workers conducted by Lawthom & Kagan, 2016). The breakdown of a personal relationship, such as in Yellow Flower's case, left migrant women without legal status, coupled with the social stigma attached to divorce in Chinese culture.

I also found that there were key points in women's narratives where their liminal legality was experienced as oppressive because they had no choice but to encounter officials. These encounters typically occurred because of women's roles as mothers. During pregnancy, childbirth and when raising young children, women's need for both healthcare and welfare brought them into contact with officials who enforced exclusionary and oppressive policies. For example, the effects of the hukou system and the One Child Policy in China were keenly felt by Yu Yan when she gave birth to her first child without medical assistance in Fujian and hid from the authorities to avoid involuntary sterilisation (a practice that was officially denied, but informally reported in rural areas of mainland China). After falling pregnant in the UK, Jin, Yu Yan and Feng Mian were forced to present themselves at GP surgeries and hospitals where their undocumented statuses were revealed. For all three women, the birth of their children meant they could no longer survive under the radar of state control, and they were processed under UK

immigration policies. This meant they were subjected to state surveillance systems, such as regular signing at police stations, arrest, and periods of detention (a reoccurring occurrence in Jin's narrative). These encounters with officials, in both China and in the UK, forced women in the study to adopt risky informal practices. Yu Yan's story of hiding from authorities in both China and in the UK during her pregnancies is an example of an informal practice which placed both her and her children at risk. A common strategy deployed by women in the study was to present at healthcare and welfare agencies in the UK as single mothers to allow their husbands to continue to work 'illegally' in the background. This meant that women with children often lived separately from their husbands, who continued to live in shared dormitories attached to Chinese restaurants. For this reason, women faced immigration enforcement, such as night-time raids and detention, alone. Women were also left to care for their children alone (an important theme in Feng Mian's narrative) with limited help from their husbands and without the support of social and family networks who would have been available in China. Limited support with childcare inhibited integration as women struggled to access English classes, to work or to socialise.

The most oppressive and constraining aspects of liminal legality were acted out on women's bodies because of their roles as mothers. Rural women migrants were doubly disadvantaged because they had lower levels of education, they were dependent on others (usually their husband's) for status and yet, as mothers, they were more likely to encounter immigration officials. These inequalities were not only present in participants' post-migratory narratives, but they were also present in women's narratives of their pre-migratory lives, acting as threads which connected the two sides of migrants' stories. Being a mother brought some benefits in relation to legal status as the mothers in the study who had acquired status had all been granted limited leave to remain based on their right to a private family life under the Human Rights Act

1998. Jin framed her decision to have a child in the UK as a strategy to improve her “guanxi” (关系, a term which means ‘connection’ or ‘relationship’) with the UK Home Office. However, seven years after the birth of her daughter, Jin was still undocumented, which suggested that being a mother offered no easy exit from liminal legal status. Narratives such as Jin’s suggest that giving birth to children in political systems with unequal legal statuses was a complex matter and one in which women, more than men, were disadvantaged.

In contrast, the two fathers in the study (Wang and Fei Hong), both of whom held an urban hukou in China (and, therefore, a more privileged legal position), had the option of applying for British citizenship after the expiry of their five-year work visas. This was due to the ‘legal’ route they had taken into the UK and the immigration policies at the time of their migration. China’s citizenship framework prohibits individuals from holding dual citizenship (Liu, 2015), in contrast with the UK citizenship framework which invites ambiguity. For this reason, after acquiring permanent residence, Wang and Fei Hong were forced to decide whether to revoke their Chinese citizenship to become British citizens. Whilst Wang took this option in the hope that, as a citizen, he would find it easier to bring his wife and child to the UK, Fei Hong decided against British citizenship because of his discomfort about revoking his Chinese status. Fei Hong’s narrative suggested that his identity was closely tied to his Chinese citizenship and, therefore, the acquisition of a regular status in the UK could lead to a shift in his self-representation. The potential change in identity associated with the change in legal status involved complex negotiations for Wang and Fei Hong. Interestingly, I noted that the option to become a British citizen was only available to men in the study who, having entered the UK via a ‘legal’ route, were better placed to regularise their status.

## **7.4 Liminal social and economic places**

The places in which migrants lived, worked, and socialised shaped their experiences of an undocumented status. Important narrative environments that formed the backdrop of much of the action in participants' narratives were Manchester's Chinatown, Chinese restaurants and takeaways and the Chinese church. As environments with characteristics of both migrants' sending and their receiving countries, all three represented liminal places. My analysis of participants' narrative constructions of these social and economic environments revealed the social, emotional and material resources and limitations that these places represented in Chinese migrants' lives. In the discussion that follows, I return to Turner's (1969) binary descriptors of liminality (namely, "silence / speech", "acceptance of pain and suffering / avoidance of pain and suffering" and "heteronomy / autonomy") to advance an argument that: the social norms and practices of participants' narrative environments created conditions in which Chinese migrants were forced to remain silent about injustice and to accept suffering.

### **7.4.1 Silence in Chinatown**

Chinatown in the popular imagination evokes images of the model ethnic minority, succeeding in education and in employment, entrepreneurial, self-sufficient, with a strong sense of community and culture. By contrast, Chinatowns also evoke images of illegality and criminality; places that are difficult to police because of the solidarity of co-ethnic networks (see Silverstone, 2011; Silverstone and Whittle, 2016). Unlike their US and South Asian counterparts, UK Chinatowns are largely business areas rather than residential places and they reflect economic struggles and portray cultural images of 'Chineseness' that are fixed and apolitical (Barabantseva, 2016). The ethnically Chinese individuals who work, run businesses, and

socialise in Chinatowns come from different countries, are members of different language groups, have different socio-economic backgrounds and different economic outcomes in the UK (Mok & Platt, 2020).

In the narratives created in this study, Chinese migrants constructed Manchester's Chinatown (曼彻斯特唐人街) as a place with varying functions and meanings at different points on the migration journey. Chinatown was a meeting point for newly arrived undocumented migrants where hometown connections brought both practical help and emotional comfort in the early and chaotic days after arrival. For settled migrants who had acquired permanent residence, Chinatown offered a place for eating familiar dishes and socialising with Chinese friends. However, Chinatowns also represented fear and mistrust, where regional divisions, country of origin, language and economic differences led to exploitation, bullying and miscommunications (a finding that resonated with Li's 2019 ethnography of Chinese restaurants in the UK). Chinatowns offered employment and accommodation for many migrants, but these "Chinatown jobs" (in Sarah's words) were synonymous with long hours and low pay. The increasing physical presence of immigration enforcement measures in UK Chinatowns meant that they had become places of fear and anxiety for some participants. Several participants lamented the fact that the threat of large fines for breaking immigration laws combined with the threat of raids meant that many Chinese employers had become increasingly reluctant to employ migrants without legal status. During fieldwork in Manchester's Chinatown, I photographed a sign posted on the door of a small Chinese grocery shop which advertised a vacancy for a shop hand. The sign, printed on white paper and written in simplified characters, stated that only applicants with a legal migration status would be considered for the position. This sign represented the increasing

exclusion of undocumented migrants from employment opportunities, and therefore, from opportunities for survival, in Manchester's Chinatowns.

Chinatown was also associated with informal practices in participants' narratives and 'illegal' activities were connected with specific Chinatown locations. For example: Chinese migrants sold pirated DVDs on the streets of Chinatown (a form of work which Yu Yan had used to survive when between jobs in catering and a lucrative business according to Treverton, 2009), the services of impersonators to pass English language and citizenship tests could be purchased from Chinatown businesses (a practice which, according to Nian Zhen, was decreasing as UK authorities tightened regulations around testing) and, according to Wang, undocumented male migrants were often found in the underground casinos of Manchester's Chinatown. Participants' descriptions of Chinatown were far removed from notions of co-ethnic solidarity and support. Instead, the association with 'illegal' and exploitative work, informal practices and the increasing exclusion of undocumented migrants from employment opportunities likely enhanced the divisions amongst the sub-ethnic groups who worked and socialised in Chinatown (an argument put forward by Beck in 2007 who suggested that Fujianese migrants were at the bottom of the hierarchy in the Chinese diaspora in the Liverpool). There was evidence of bonding between migrants and shared representations of enduring difficulties (as in Yu Yan's repeated use of "we" rather than "I" to tell her story), but such bonding was limited to others from the same region in China who spoke the same dialect. Such divisions, I argue, created the conditions for Chinese migrants to remain silent, rather than to speak out, about their needs and about the abuses they experienced in work. In this respect, Chinatown as constructed by participants in this study was a place of silence (rather than speech) where the acceptance of pain and suffering due to precarious work and an irregular status was the only option available.

#### **7.4.2 Suffering in the Chinese restaurant and takeaway**

Other important places which were constructed in depth in most participants' narratives were economic: Chinese restaurants and takeaways. With the exception of four participants who had never worked in Chinese catering in the UK (Yellow Flower, Z, Meng and Zhan Fang), migrants' narratives centred around their experiences of working in Chinese restaurants and takeaways. The temporal ordering of these places is discussed later in this chapter, but here I present my analysis of how the spatial ordering of these establishments influenced Chinese migrants' experiences of life in the UK.

Migrants' descriptions of the spatial ordering of Chinese restaurants support accounts in the literature in which an employer's designation was strongly associated with physical place (Kay, 1990; Li, 2019): the most highly skilled employees – Chinese chefs – worked in kitchens and rarely left this “back of house” space; the “front of house” roles were largely undertaken by women, with customer-facing roles belonging to the best paid waitresses with language skills (both English and Cantonese were valued by employers); and the least skilled workers, almost always women, filled drinks in the bar, washed bedding from the shared dormitories and cleaned the restaurant toilets. The gendered dimension of these workspaces echoed the observations of Kay's (1990) ethnography in which ‘out front’ spaces of the Chinese restaurant were occupied by women, whereas ‘out back’ spaces were occupied by men. Men and women were also physically separated in the dormitory accommodation provided by employers, which meant that women who had migrated to join a spouse often slept in a different room to their husbands. As Nian Zhen's story showed, this enforced separation could lead to irreparable damage in migrant's relationships.

In contrast to the hierarchical and gendered spatial ordering of the Chinese restaurant, Chinese takeaways were constructed as more informal places where employees moved between both counter and kitchen. John and Sarah, both of whom had worked in family takeaways, described these workplaces as comfortable and secure places where they could trust their colleagues who were also their family members. Growing up in a Chinese family takeaway was constructed as a normal aspect of John and Sarah's childhoods (which resonated with Song's 1999 construction of child labour in family-run Chinese takeaways in Britain as "helping out", p.73). In contrast, work in Chinese restaurants made John and Sarah feel vulnerable to immigration enforcement. However, Yu Yan's experience of being employed as an 'outsider' (a non-family member) in a family takeaway increased her vulnerability compared with her description of restaurant work. She was caught in the crossfire of difficult family relationships, subject to abuse at the hands of her employer, and she had no colleagues on whom she could rely to witness her abuse. These stories suggested that migrant workers' relationships with their employers and colleagues determined their experiences of work in Chinese takeaways. Spending time in the environment of Chinese restaurants and takeaways also had both a physical and an emotional impact on participants in the study. Participants' descriptions of the heat of the kitchen, the greasy residue left on the skin and hair, the fatigue experienced after long shifts and the cramped dormitories where migrants slept created images of a physically arduous workplace. Accounts of arguments and bullying between employees, racist treatment by customers, and the constant threat of both immigration raids and unemployment lent an emotional intensity to the description of these workplaces.

Workplaces in Chinese migrant's narratives were also shaped by the languages spoken. As already established, the UK Chinese population is made up of migrants from different countries

of origin and different regions of China with distinctive linguistic and cultural identities. In participants' narratives, Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong migrants often owned Chinese restaurants and takeaways (which reflected the history of Chinese migration to the UK), whereas the Putonghua and Hakka-speaking mainland Chinese migrants in the study (except Fei Hong) were employed by others. Difficulties communicating with colleagues were a routine part of work in the narratives. This finding resonated with Li's (2019) ethnography in which miscommunication was found to be a key feature of the functioning of Chinese catering establishments. The communication that occurred in these workspaces also took on a gendered dimension in the narratives. Language skills were more important to migrant women than they were to migrant men in the workplace. Putonghua-speaking migrant women were able to secure a higher wage if they mastered Cantonese - to communicate with their employers, other colleagues and with Cantonese-speaking customers - and English to take orders from English-speaking customers. For educated mainlanders, such as Joanne, learning Cantonese and English from the workplace was both easy and natural. However, for rural women with limited education and limited literacy skills, acquiring additional languages was a near impossible task. Such women had fewer opportunities for advancement in Chinese catering and were most at risk of losing their job. Nian Zhen and Yu Yan articulated how their low social position left them feeling useless and helpless. By contrast, the men in the study who worked as chefs placed less emphasis on their language ability as they were not expected to be customer-facing. Instead, their cooking skills, combined with the shortage in Chinese chefs, meant they had a more powerful position in the workplace, which was leveraged further once they had acquired a regular migration status. However, men's limited language skills, combined with being confined in workplaces where Chinese languages were exclusively spoken for long working hours, meant

that opportunities for integration into UK society were limited for Chinese men. In addition, working alongside Chinese workers who spoke different languages offered limited opportunities for mutual support. There was little sense in the narratives of worker solidarity between employees in the kitchen, despite their physical proximity.

Alongside the languages spoken in Chinese workplaces, the informal practices related to the payment of wages and tax returns adopted by employers increased migrants' powerlessness. Participants explained that employers commonly: underreported employees' wages to avoid tax; refused to return tax on behalf of employers; and underpaid the wage committed to on the work visa. These informal practices forced Chinese migrants to stay silent about the exploitative working conditions to which they were subjected, despite the sense of injustice and suffering conveyed during interviews. There is a perception that Chinese do not speak out about exploitative working conditions because of co-ethnic solidarity and Confucian ideas of harmony and emotional containment (see, for example, Lawthom et al., 2013). Instead, the narratives suggested that suffering in silence was the only option for migrant workers in vulnerable social and economic positions in Chinese restaurants and takeaways. The spatial ordering of Chinese restaurants and takeaways combined with the language differences, informal practices and complex relationships with employers prohibited migrants from speaking out about the hardships they endured or acting collectively to improve working conditions.

#### **7.4.3 Acceptance in the Chinese church**

In this study, six participants (Joanne, Jin, Yellow Flower, Yu Yan, Feng Mian and Z) attended a Chinese church on a regular basis and their experiences of church shaped the way they made sense of their migration narratives. The role of the Christian church in Chinese migrants'

lives is a relatively under researched area, although several studies have been conducted in recent years, such as Li's (2018) doctoral dissertation on the Christian conversion of Chinese migrants in the UK and Rao's (2017) examination of Chinese Christians in Germany. Such studies have focused on international Chinese students and examined the methods of conversion and the interaction of Chinese identities with Christian identities. There has been limited examination of how undocumented Chinese migrants related to the church or the meaning of church in their lives. In Pieke et al.'s (2004) seminal text on Fujianese migration to Europe, the role of the Chinese church was discussed in two short paragraphs as a place for "business cooperation", "employee recruitment" and "migration routes" (p. 179-80). This is at odds with the wider migration literature, in which the role of migrants' faith practices has attracted more sustained attention (see, for example, Dikomitis, 2012). In the discussion that follows, I argue that the Chinese church as a social and spiritual place helped migrants to accept and make sense of the suffering of their liminal legal status. Such acceptance of suffering, rather than avoidance, is, according to Turner, a feature of liminality.

For the Fujianese churchgoers in the study, the Chinese church represented a place for both practical support and for belonging. Migrants could access advice from fellow Fujianese migrants and from the Fujianese pastor. As Joanne pointed out, being a member of the church also gave her access to people from professional social classes who had greater residues of social capital (such as English language proficiency) and could countersign immigration applications and translate official documents. Feng Mian sought support from members of the church when her family encountered difficulties, Jin received financial support from church friends to care for her children, and Yu Yan was grateful for the free English classes she accessed through church and for the friendship and fellowship she received.

Whilst enjoying the sense of belonging and practical support that attending Chinese church brought, all the Chinese churchgoers in the study had converted to Christianity. Several participants (Joanne, Jin and Yu Yan) used similar expressions about their connection with the church - "I live in the church" ("我生活在教会") - which emphasised the centrality of church in their lives. They also used the term "church sisters" ("教会姐妹") and "brothers and sisters" ("兄弟姐妹") to refer to others in the church which is an uncommon way of addressing friends in Chinese and a transference of Christian vernacular into Putonghua (a practice that Li also observed in his 2018 study of conversion to Christianity amongst Chinese students). Jin and Yellow Flower also expressed their admiration of Christian teachings about self-sacrifice and voluntary service to others. Participants' Christian faith appeared to provide a framework with which to understand the suffering they had endured due to protracted legal processes to attain the right to remain in the UK. Christian teachings about the value of suffering and perseverance, embodied in the life of Jesus, have a relation with the Confucian virtue "ren" (忍) which means "to bear" or "to endure". In Confucian thought, enduring suffering can strengthen the character and qualities of an individual (Cheng, Lo & Chio, 2010). Both the Christian notion and the Chinese concept were captured in Jin's description of how she tolerated multiple arrests and periods of detention, refused voluntary return, and endured ten years of liminal legality in the UK. Similarly, Yellow Flower framed her application for the right to remain as a "spirit[ual] test" and she found meaning in her socio-economic shift, from a teacher in Guangzhou, China to a cleaner in Manchester, in the teachings of Jesus and the Christian message of humility before God. Jin and Yellow Flower's conceptualisation of their Christian faith as a source of meaning through which to make sense of the hardships they had endured resonated with Turner's

description of the liminal phase as characterised by the ‘acceptance of pain and suffering’ rather than the ‘avoidance of pain and suffering’. Holding a Christian faith and belonging to a Christian fellowship helped Chinese migrants to accept the pain and suffering of liminal legality and to find spiritual meaning in the process.

Interestingly, for Fujianese women in the study, the church appeared to represent a creative place in which they could temporarily escape the constraints of an irregular migration status. I observed that, in the church, Fujianese women were visibly relaxed, and they enjoyed the fellowship of other Fujianese women. Jin explained that her church membership nurtured her ambition to become a support worker after she acquired a regular status. This was a role that, previously, Jin had not considered. Feng Mian’s narrative pointed to the sense of refuge she found in the church, which appeared to offer a break from the social order of the ‘outside’ world in which migration status, gender, ethnicity, language and employment skills intersected to create specific vulnerabilities for undocumented Chinese women. The fact that the Fujianese congregation at the church was largely made up of women perhaps offered participants a break from the gendered norms of behaviour that affected other aspects of their lives as undocumented mothers and wives. The Chinese church also offered a connection with China, and with Fujian in particular, through language and hometown/village associations, symbolised by the Fujianese pastor who led Sunday services for the Putonghua-speaking congregation. This connection with Fujian perhaps explains my observation that participants were at ease in the church environment. This finding resonated with Dikomitis’ (2012) argument in relation to Greek Cypriot refugees: that religious practices and rituals helped migrants to create and recreate home in their experiences of long-term displacement. My interpretation of the role of the church in Chinese women’s narratives also has parallels with Turner’s (1969) conceptualisation of liminality as a

creative period and a break from social order. Although Chinese migrants were constrained by the legal and social restrictions of an irregular migration status, the Chinese church may be understood as a creative social place in which undocumented migrants could experience ease and belonging.

Despite the practical and emotional benefits of belonging to the church, the limits of the support available were expressed in many of the narratives of church-going participants. Church leaders and members were unable to resolve migrants' irregular migration statuses. Although prayer was valued, most recognised that accessing an immigration lawyer was the only means to regularise status. The church also offered limited opportunities for undocumented Chinese migrants to integrate outside of the Chinese congregation. Although the church leadership actively promoted connections with both local non-Chinese congregations and other international Chinese diaspora communities, church membership rarely helped undocumented participants to integrate into UK society. Contrary to the broader literature about the role of the church in promoting the integration of migrants, the Chinese church in participants' narratives did not have this role in migrants' narratives. Instead, it was a place of belonging amongst Chinese migrants who shared experiences of irregular statuses but did not offer a foothold into social circles that existed outside of the linguistic and regional social groups from which participants had migrated.

### **7.5 Liminal time**

The condition of a liminal legal status had a temporal dimension in the narratives of Chinese migrants in which time and waiting came to define migrants' lives. Here, I place the concept of liminality into dialogue with other sociological concepts of time, and my own theorisation of time as experienced by Chinese migrants in the study. I focus here on three categories of

migrants' subjective experiences of time: time interrupted; state of waiting; and the rhythm of life.

### **7.5.1 Time interrupted**

I use the term 'time interrupted' to describe periods when the normal, temporal flow of everyday life and of individuals' life courses were thrown into disarray. Griffiths (2014, p.2000) used the term "temporal ruptures" to refer to varied expected and unexpected events in migrants' lives which create dislocation from an existing pattern of temporal and spatial expectations, such as: the moment of migration itself; a favourable or unfavourable immigration decision; or unexpected events such as arrest, detention or deportation. Robertson (2019) used the term "migrants interrupted" to describe how biographic events, such as marriage and career progression, were disrupted by the temporal constraints of immigration controls for Asian "middling" migrants in Australia (p.174). My construction of 'time interrupted' shares similarities with Griffiths' "temporal ruptures" and Robertson's "migrants interrupted", but I also draw on Chinese conceptions of the life course and on Turner's description of the liminal phase as characterised by 'heteronomy' rather than 'autonomy'.

The everyday temporal patterns of migrants' lives were disrupted, initially, at the moment of migration. Participants who migrated from rural villages conveyed a sense of feeling lost and disoriented as they become accustomed to the urban areas where they could find work and draw on the support of fellow villagers. Those who had previously worked on farms in rural Fujian where their time was organised by the demands of the farm, found themselves initially unemployed which meant their days were unstructured. Those who found work in Chinese catering entered the temporal world of the Chinese restaurant, which involved: long and unsocial

hours, short breaks, little choice about overtime and just one day off per week. The control of 'Chinese restaurant time' structured migrants' everyday lives and left them with limited temporal autonomy, often for many years. These working patterns interrupted migrants' social and family lives and made it difficult for individuals to have a life outside of the kitchen. The fact that many participants shared accommodation with colleagues meant that there was little respite from the temporal ordering of the restaurant. The time of the Chinese restaurant also created non-healthy routines and rhythms which were out of sync with mainstream work and leisure in the UK, and likely created additional barriers to learning and integration. Although the difficult working conditions experienced by undocumented Chinese migrants were well documented in the existing literature (see, for example, Bloch & McKay, 2016; Lawthom et al., 2013; Wu & Liu, 2012), my analysis of the temporal demands of Chinese restaurants and takeaways on migrants' lives is a new lens through which to understand their experiences. The Chinese restaurant had a heteronomous presence in the narratives and migrants' experiences of adaptation to these spatial-temporal realities were portrayed as disorientating and emotionally difficult.

The change in everyday temporal patterns also disrupted the life course of Chinese migrants. Almost all the mothers who took part in the study had been separated from their children for long periods of time. For example, Jin, Yu Yan and Feng Mian left their children behind in China and were unable to return due to the cost of travel, the necessity of repaying debts paid to migration brokers, the inability to re-enter the UK without a visa and the continuous residence requirements of the UK immigration system. However, there were two mothers in the study who migrated to the UK with their children: Yellow Flower and Nian Zhen. Yellow Flower migrated to the UK with her son after spending the majority of his childhood separated from him in China. During his childhood in China, Yellow Flower's son was cared for by his maternal grandparents

in Yellow Flower's rural village whilst she worked in Guangzhou. Therefore, her family migration to the UK was a reverse disruption of the pattern of mothering that Yellow Flower had established in China where she was the absent breadwinner after her divorce from her Chinese husband. Nian Zhen, the other mother in the study who migrated with her child, was forced to leave her son in the care of another Chinese family because of the temporal demands of the Chinese restaurant. Given the traditional gender roles still prevalent in rural communities in Chinese societies (e.g., Chen, 2019), the rural mothers in the study had broken with expectations by relying on their ageing parents and in-laws in China to raise their children. The distance between their role expectations as mothers and the reality of separation over many years led to inner conflict (an experience shared by internal migrant mothers in China, To, So, & Kwok, 2018). Jin explained; "We've been abroad for so long. We are not that close to our children anymore. Our children did not grow up by our sides. There's no common language between us. I feel ashamed. It has been so many years." The passage of time, combined with the physical distance from her children, led to a rupture in Jin's role as a mother which brought feelings of guilt and shame. Although she originally hoped to bring her daughters to the UK, Jin recognised that their increasing ages would make that difficult. Whilst Jin's role as a mother and daughter was disrupted by her long physical absence from her family in China, the passage of time had erased the possibility of a full family reunion and the migration plan that she originally envisaged. The two fathers in the study, Wang and Fei Hong, also experienced long periods of separation from their children, but their physical absence as father figures featured less in their narratives compared with the poignancy of migrant mothers' accounts of separation from their children. Perhaps traditional Confucian notions of patriarchy, in which fathers were configured as 'the master of the family' (一家之主) whereas mothers were responsible for providing both

physical and emotional care (Shek, 2001; 2007 cited in Bond, 2010, p.525), were easier to fulfil for migrant fathers compared with migrant mothers. Alternatively, the fact that both Fei Hong and Wang were reunited with their children at the time of fieldwork may account for the fact that the separation featured less in their interviews.

Being subjected to an undocumented status also disrupted the temporal flow of childhood for younger migrants in the study. Sarah and John's childhoods were temporally in sync with their British peers throughout their early years in the UK as they progressed through the British education system. However, they both experienced an interruption in their everyday rhythms when they turned 18 and, unable to progress to higher education with their peers, were forced to work in Chinese catering. Like the adult migrants in the study, Sarah and John experienced a shift to a different temporal order determined by the working demands of the Chinese restaurant. Both young people lost touch with school friends, with whom they no longer had time to socialise, and they struggled to explain why they had dropped out of the normative temporal rhythms of their peers. The new temporal ordering of Sarah and John's lives left little time for their childhood aspirations, hopes and interests. Therefore, the shift to an irregular status, intersected with the temporal demands of Chinese restaurants and takeaways to create disrupted subjective experiences of time for those who grew up into an undocumented status.

### **7.5.2 State of waiting (等待的状态)**

Following the initial interruption that the shift to an undocumented status created in migrants' lives, most participants then entered a period of stalled time where waiting came to dominate their lives. I call this period the 'state of waiting' (等待的状态), a translation of Feng

Mian's words. My use of the concept, 'state of waiting', shares similarities with Griffiths' conceptualisation of "suspended time" as a never-ending period, out of the control of the waiter, when time is paused. However, I also draw on Chinese lay beliefs in change which, I argue, help to fully draw out the experience of the 'state of waiting' for Chinese migrants in the study.

Waiting is a theoretically rich area of sociological examination and studies have associated migrant experiences of waiting for immigration processes with liminality and suffering. Waiting has also been described as a mechanism of state control, designed to deter migrant settlement (see, for example, Fee, 2022). I found these characteristics of waiting in the narratives, including: Sarah and John's accounts of being suspended in the present, "sixteen forever" and unable to move forward with their lives due to their irregular immigration status; Wang and Nian Zhen's accounts of waiting out the five years of their work visas to acquire a regular status; Feng Mian's description of feeling anxious and uneasy whilst waiting for over a decade for the outcome of her application for asylum; and Yellow Flower's vivid description of how waiting for her immigration outcome suffocated every moment of her present and made her feel unable to breathe. As time passed, migrants felt increasingly powerless against the slow bureaucracy of the immigration system and, for most, the only option available was to wait.

Chinese migrant's accounts of the impact of waiting resonated with scholarship which has highlighted the detrimental effect of waiting for immigration decisions on the wellbeing of young people (Allsopp, Chase & Mitchell, 2015; Kohli & Kaukko, 2018) and the effect of protracted temporary statuses (Gonzales, 2011; Menjivar, 2006). However, I found that the state of waiting in the narratives also had a positive quality which was absent from the literature: participants conveyed pain and suffering alongside a sense of hopefulness. Despite the difficulties of their past and present and the uncertainties of their futures, many migrants held

onto a belief in the possibility of change. A series of psychological studies, designed to examine the differences in lay beliefs in change between Eastern and Western cultures, have found that Chinese people tend to anticipate more change from an initial state than their Western counterparts (Ji, Nisbett & Su, 2001). Whereas Western philosophies have focused on linear progression and universal truths, Eastern philosophical texts (such as the *I Ching* [易经], or the *Book of Changes*) have emphasised cyclical ways of thinking which has encouraged individuals to consider events from a long-term perspective rather than focussing on immediate gains or losses (Ji, Nisbett & Su, 2001). Ji and colleagues (2001) suggested that this belief in change may allow Chinese (and other East Asians) to face hardships with hope and to remain openminded about the future. Given the potential impact of Chinese ancient thought on contemporary ways of thinking and coping, I add this Chinese lay belief in change to the concept of “state of waiting” to convey undocumented Chinese migrants’ subjective experiences of waiting. I found such beliefs in change in Jin and John’s narratives, for example (see chapters four and six, respectively), when their stories ended with a thread of hope which looked to the future and the possibility of change.

### **7.5.3 The rhythm of life (生活节奏)**

The final subjective experience of time I identified in migrants’ narratives was “the rhythm of life” (Fei Hong’s words). I use “the rhythm of life” to refer to the temporal experiences of the latter part of participants’ migration journeys when they had acquired the right to remain and were settled in the UK (such as Joanne, Nian Zhen, Wang, Fei Hong and Yu Yan towards the end of her narrative). These participants had either reunited with family by bringing their spouses

and child(ren) to the UK or they had formed a new family to which they were committed. They had often achieved stability in employment and income and had become accustomed to their new temporal rhythm. After the initial temporal ruptures caused by the act of migration and the entry into the times of the Chinese restaurant, participants who were settled had acquired more control over their own work, leisure and family time. The heteronomous time of Chinese catering had given way to more flexible working patterns for migrants who held more powerful positions in the Chinese labour market as skilled and documented workers (such as Wang and Joanne) or as self-employed restaurateurs (such as Fei Hong). Fei Hong, for example, had benefitted from the increased number of international Chinese students at the university that was local to his restaurant. The temporal rhythm of the university provided Fei Hong with a predictable temporal pattern for his business which brought economic stability and temporal autonomy to his life.

This change of temporal rhythms led to changes in migrants' temporal expectations. After they had revised their original plan to sojourn in the UK and then return to China, most participants' priorities shifted: they were no longer focused on earning money to send remittances back to China and, instead, they prioritised regular immigration status and the education of their children. As Wang explained in his full interview: first he needed a job, then he needed a healthy body which allowed him to work to repay his debts and acquire status. At the time of his interview, he needed support with aspects of his everyday life as a settled migrant, such as translation of letters and communication with his child's teachers. As migrants moved through their status journey and achieved a sense of stability (not possible for all participants), their needs, expectations and priorities changed.

The security and autonomy found in the rhythm of life for settled migrants meant that participants no longer planned to return to China. Instead, they viewed the UK as their

permanent home. The gains migrants had achieved (such as acquiring the right to remain, reuniting with family, buying a home, and achieving financial security) were hard won and required sacrifices which, once made, contributed to migrants' willingness to commit to long term futures in the UK. As the years passed, participants fell out of sync with the rhythm of life in contemporary China which continued to increase with pace and intensity. Fei Hong's description of contemporary China, although filled with awe, focused on the speed of development, powerfully symbolised by the development of high-speed rail which, Fei Hong declared, had surpassed the rest of the world. Having left the rhythm of life in China, Fei Hong could not see a way for his family to return: his son would struggle to keep up in education (a concern shared by Yellow Flower and Wang) and he would find it difficult to conduct business (a sentiment echoed by Nian Zhen and Wang). Having been absent from China for so many years, participants knew that they would find it difficult to fit into the temporal pattern of contemporary Chinese society.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have advanced the argument that undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences of life in the UK can be understood in relation to the concept of liminality. I have focused on three domains of liminality: liminal law and status, liminal social and economic places, and liminal time. First, in my discussion of liminal law and status, I have argued that participants' experiences of irregular and temporary legal statuses can be understood as a form of liminal legality. However, I found that, for migrants who were subjected to rural hukous in China, they had already experienced a form of liminal legality before their migration to the UK. Additionally, I have argued that gender intersected with experiences of liminal legality to create

specific vulnerabilities for Chinese women. Next, I examined the liminal social and economic places in which participants spent their time. I argued that the characteristics of participants' narrative environments were aligned with Turner's (1969) descriptors of liminality: migrants were *silent* in Chinatown, they *suffered* in the Chinese restaurant and takeaway, and they found *acceptance* and meaning in the Chinese church. Finally, I showed how liminal statuses led to disrupted temporal experiences for migrants, in which their normative rhythms and expectations were interrupted. Open-ended temporary legal statuses left migrants trapped in a 'state of waiting' which was emotionally painful. When migrants acquired a permanent legal status and found a stable 'rhythm of life', they simultaneously fell out of sync with the 'rhythm of life' in contemporary China. This meant that, for most participants', migration became a one-way journey.

In my discussion of the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants, I have argued that the liminality they experienced did not represent a fixed period in their lives: rather, it was open-ended and extended over many years. Further, for some participants, liminality was a characteristic of their lives both *before* migration and *after* the acquisition of a permanent legal status. The emotional effect of this extended 'in between' condition was a strong contributor to the expressions of unease, anxiety, helplessness, and loss found in migrants' narratives. My interpretation of the narratives through the lens of liminality, therefore, suggests that undocumented Chinese migrants' psychological wellbeing and mental health was at risk. The 'hot and bitter tears' of migrants' narratives were connected with their liminal legal statuses, the liminal places that were the backdrop of their stories, and their liminal experiences of time. In the final chapter, alongside a presentation of my reflections on the study, I discuss the implications for social work practice of Chinese migrants' experiences of open-ended liminality.

## Chapter 8 Reflections and conclusions

### 8.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I advanced an argument that undocumented Chinese migrants' experiences can be understood through the lens of liminality which, for some participants, was a feature of their lives *before* the shift to an undocumented status and *after* the acquisition of a permanent legal status. Different levels of citizenship in China and the consequent effect on access to social goods meant that liminality was a quality of some participants' pre-migratory experiences and a precursor to their liminal lives in the UK. The limits of social integration for participants who had acquired a permanent legal status meant that, despite their legal and economic integration, they remained in long-term socially marginal positions. In this chapter, to draw my argument to a close, I discuss the implications of this open-ended experience of liminality alongside my reflections on conducting the study. I first reflect on the strengths of the study. In doing so, I suggest ways in which my methodological approach, narrative inquiry underpinned by ethnographic sensitivities, adds both nuance and depth to the study of undocumented Chinese migration. Next, I focus on the challenges involved in conducting the study and the limitations of the research design. The most significant challenge I faced related to the cross-language nature of the study and the difficulties involved in the representation of migrants' lives in text. Then, I return to the overall research aim and the three research questions that guided this study to summarise how my interpretations of the narratives generated knowledge in relation to each question. I then return to an objective I outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis; to construct knowledge that may be useful to social work practice. To achieve this objective, I develop three implications for social work practice that are extensions of

my interpretation of Chinese migrants' narratives. Finally, I suggest ways in which the research idea may be extended through further study.

## **8.2 Reflections on conducting the study**

Empirical research about undocumented migration involves both practical and ethical difficulties and compromises (Düvell et al., 2010; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021). Such challenges relate to the sensitive nature of the topic and the approach required to engage a potentially vulnerable group in primary research. In the discussion that follows, I reflect on the strengths and challenges involved in conducting this study.

### **8.2.1 The strengths of the study**

The use of narrative inquiry, underpinned by ethnographic sensitivities and sensibilities, was an effective research design for the purpose of this study. My commitment to spending time at two research sites, an important element of both narrative inquiry and ethnography, helped me to develop trust with potential participants. The development of such trust in my relationships with participants was fundamental to the quality and depth of the narratives created during the study. Additionally, the decision to undertake participant observations in both the Chinese church and the Chinese community centre contributed to my analysis of the meaning and value of these places in migrants' narratives. This attention to ethnographic context in my interpretation of participants' narratives was an important element of the acquisition of knowledge in this study. Furthermore, my training in Chinese languages and the support of a multilingual Research Assistant meant that participants could choose to take part in the study in either English or

Putonghua. This choice of languages enabled me to engage with the narratives of migrants who were socially marginalised and had only a limited grasp of English. Additionally, during interviews conducted in Putonghua, I was able to respond in vivo to participants' narratives and to inquire into their stories at certain plot points. My decision to analyse the interview transcripts with both Chinese and English versions side-by-side enabled me to select carefully the English translations I used to represent Chinese words and phrases that would retain the metaphoric richness of migrants' stories.

Another strength of the study design was the inclusion of a fellowship at Fudan University, Shanghai. I noted in the introductory chapter to this thesis that I was positioned as an 'outsider' to the research participants and to the experience of being subjected to an undocumented status. Additionally, my engagement with a linguistic group to which I was external was a tension throughout the study. The four-month fellowship at Fudan University was designed to examine and address this core tension. Through field visits to state and NGO social work organisations in Shanghai and discussions with social work practitioners, academics and students, I developed an understanding of the development of social work across mainland China. This background research helped to frame participants' limited experiences of social work and their perceptions of professional support. During the fellowship I also had the opportunity to travel to Fujian province, from which six of the participants had migrated. In Fujian, I saw first-hand the impressive cultural buildings that were funded by the remittances of overseas Fujianese migrants in the region. This experience developed my narrative imagination as my understanding of Fujianese conceptions of emigration as a path to wealth, success and security was deepened. Finally, I had the opportunity to present my preliminary analysis of the data set to social work academics, practitioners, and students at a workshop I coordinated. As detailed in chapter three,

Chinese colleagues encouraged me to reflect on: the relationships between participants' migration narratives and their life stories; the intersection of an undocumented status with other biographical and structural factors, such as gender, regional identity, position in the family and hukou status; and the role of migrants' networks in sustaining an undocumented life. This process of testing my interpretations and reflecting on the feedback of a Chinese social work audience enhanced the validity of my interpretations and brought to the surface my unquestioned assumptions.

To further enhance the validity of my interpretations, I also attended to the issue of narrative incoherence and fragmentation in this study. A disadvantage of narrative inquiry as a research approach is that the impulse to search for and present narrative coherence can be problematic. Riessman (2008) argued that difficult life events "disrupt meaningful connections" (p.190). Thus, narratives that reflect on such events may be fragmentary in nature. Riessman (2008) warned that it is perhaps the "needful ears" of the listener, the researcher and the reader, who seek coherence that may not exist in narratives of experience (p.190). Aware of these issues, I sought to present the fragmentary nature of Chinese migrants' narratives. Examples of my attention to narrative fragmentation are contained in my discussion of: the disorientation connected with participants' shift to an undocumented status in chapter four; the anxiety and isolation expressed in the narratives of Chinese women presented in chapter five; and the unresolved narrative complications of the stories in chapter six. Wary of the risk of presenting migrants' stories as though they emerged independently of context, I also included the questions and utterances of myself, as the lead interviewer, and the Research Assistant, in the presentation of the narratives in chapters four to six. Through my attention to context and fragmentation, I

have guarded against the impulse to present a coherent account of the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants that was not faithful to the narratives as told.

### **8.2.2 Methodological innovation**

In the review of literature presented in chapter two, I noted that previous studies predominantly used ethnographic research designs to examine undocumented Chinese migration. In chapter three, I discussed the strengths of ethnography and the relevance to studies of undocumented migration given the ethnographer's commitment to time in the field and to understanding the social world from participants' perspectives. However, the established ethnographers in the field (Liu-Farrer, 2008; Li, 2012; Pieke et al., 2004) rarely paid close attention to how language was used by Chinese migrants to construct their experiences of an undocumented status. Thus, this thesis makes a methodological contribution to the existing literature through the deployment of narrative inquiry, underpinned by ethnographic sensitivities and sensibilities. This approach contributes to the existing knowledge by capturing: the real and ghostly audiences against whom migrants' narratives were constructed; the narrative environments in which stories were set; the structural components of narratives; the presentation of self and other characters; and the use of idiomatic and figurative language to describe the emotional lives of participants. In the close analysis of participant's use of language, I hope to have captured the detail of the lives of Chinese participants and conveyed, in a recognisable and meaningful way, the experience of an undocumented status.

### **8.3 Challenges involved in conducting the study**

Any attempt to represent human life in text encounters difficulties. Inevitably, a gap exists between the narratives as told by Chinese migrants and my retelling of the story. In this study, rather than searching for the ‘true’ experience of undocumented status, I sought to achieve “fidelity to the told story”, which involved both honouring the story and “preserving the value and dignity of the teller” (Kim, 2015, p.111). My attempts to honour migrants’ stories were complicated by the use of cross-language methods. In the discussion that follows, I discuss the key differences between English and Chinese which created both ethical and epistemological challenges in the design of this multiple language research study. Then, I provide an example of the challenges I encountered when interpreting and presenting the Chinese terms and phrases used by participants into English.

#### **8.3.1 Differences between Chinese and English**

Translating Chinese languages into English raised challenges that related to the specificities of both languages. For example, Chinese characters map against morphemes, unlike English in which the alphabet relates to phonemes in the spoken language (Li & Shu, 2010). This means that the characters used by participants to tell their stories often contained multiple meanings that were difficult to express in English. Another specificity of Chinese languages is the use of idioms which relate to history, culture, and traditions. The meaning of many Chinese idioms bears no relationship with the literal meanings of the Chinese characters, and instead may relate to a historical event, a cultural myth, or a work of literature (Li & Shu, 2010). In the presentation of the narratives, I attempted to convey the multiple meanings and connotations of Chinese characters and idioms but, inevitably, the poetry, history and beauty of figurative expressions

were difficult to convey in full in English. In the following example, I show how my interpretation of a key phrase in this thesis – ‘hot and bitter tears’ – typified the challenges I encountered in the translation of Chinese to English. The example is drawn from an interview with Wang, whose narrative is presented in chapter four.

### **8.3.2 The challenge of translation: ‘hot and bitter tears’**

Wang’s use of the phrase: “辛酸泪”, ‘hot and bitter tears’, caught my attention during his interview. When the transcripts were returned to me from the professional translation company, the English translation offered underneath the Chinese transcription of Wang’s utterance was “sad memories”. I suspected that the Chinese phrase was stronger than this simple translation and I therefore looked up the possible meanings and translations of each character. My suspicion was well founded: the phrase can be translated in several different ways. 辛酸泪 can mean: ‘bitter hardship’, ‘bitter memories’, ‘pain and suffering’, ‘scalding tears’ or ‘hot and bitter tears’. The first character, 辛, can mean ‘hot’ or pungent and adds a sensorial element of either taste or touch. The evocation of taste is also evident in the second character -酸 – ‘bitter’. The character is also commonly used to express suffering and endurance. Finally, 泪, relates to physical tears, but also the verb ‘to weep’. The choice of English words used to represent the phrase affects the meaning expressed. Whilst some of the translations listed above evoke memory, others bring to the fore the physicality of the phrase, and the distasteful sensory experience. ‘Scalding tears’ and

'hot and bitter tears', in particular, create the image of a lasting impression on the body and the psyche.

As the phrase became an increasingly important concept to connect migrants' narratives with my theoretical interpretations, I researched the etymology of the phrase and found that it originated from a classical Chinese novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦), written by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹) (c. 1715–1764). The work is viewed as one of the most influential Chinese novels written (Zhu, Lei & Craig, 2021), due to the philosophical and historical importance of the story and the psychological depth of the characters constructed by the author. It is a linguistically complex text, known for the author's use of "word play", "verbal riddle", "puns" and "enigmas", with each page containing language that could have multiple meanings (Anthony, 2018, pp.3-4). The complexity and depth of the text has warranted a field of studies dedicated to the novel - *Redology* (红学) - its own specialism within the study of Chinese literature (Hu, Wang & Wu, 2014, p.1). Given the literary background to Wang's use of the idiom, 辛酸泪 (hot and bitter tears), it is difficult to convey the full depth of historical, poetic, philosophical and literary meaning of the phrase. Nor can I ascertain the extent to which Wang was aware of the literary connotations of his words, or the influence of his education and cultural background on his construction of his experiences of work in the kitchens of Chinese restaurants in the UK. Aside from this one example, the narratives presented in this thesis likely contain many more uses of language with multiple shades of meaning and deep historical and literary roots. My ability to identify and represent the full complexity of the Chinese terms used by migrants to construct their narratives was limited by my partial knowledge of Chinese languages, and the limits involved in translating terms from Chinese to English when there is no satisfactory

counterpart. For this reason, my ability to represent the narratives in all their complexity, is likely to be incomplete in the final text.

### **8.3.3 Limitations imposed by the research design**

The research design deployed in this study was limited in several ways. First, given the small scale, exploratory nature of the study, I cannot claim that the findings represented the experiences of all undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. The diversity of the UK Chinese population and the heterogeneous experiences of Chinese migrants posed challenges for any claim to generalisability. The individuals who took part in this study had varied regional and linguistic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses which shaped their experiences. Participants' gender, too, affected their experiences of an irregular migration status. However, the diverse backgrounds of the participants led to the construction of a rich set of narratives that were appropriate for my methodological approach. By connecting my interpretation of the narratives with the concept of liminality, I sought to generate knowledge that may be theoretically generalizable (Hammersley, 1992) to a wider population of Chinese migrants in the UK, and to Chinese migrants in other national contexts. My construction of participants' experiences in terms of liminal law and status, liminal places and liminal time may be productively explored in other contexts and with other migrant groups.

Another methodological limitation was the potential bias introduced by the use of a snowball approach to participant recruitment. Undocumented migrants are likely to be reluctant to reveal their status to researchers given the risk that they, or their families and networks, will become known to immigration authorities. The use of snowball recruitment was, therefore, a practical and effective recruitment strategy. However, this approach meant that recruitment was

based, first, on the strength of my professional relationships, and then, on the personal relationships between participants and gatekeepers. As detailed in chapter three, I recruited a higher proportion of female compared with male participants. This was reflective of the relationships I developed in the field as a woman, which were mostly with other women. Practical constraints on the time of migrant men may have affected recruitment as the husbands of most of the female participants were in work during the time I spent in the field. In addition, by drawing on two specific sites in Manchester to develop research relationships – a Chinese community centre and a Chinese church - migrants who were not in contact with these organisations were excluded from the study (a phenomenon observed by Kwan Chan, Cole & Bowpitt, 2007). The importance of these two places to my interpretation of the narratives perhaps reflects the influence of these sites on the research findings.

Critical decisions made in relation to the methods of data collection also influenced the scope of the study. For example, I purposefully avoided questioning participants about the methods they may have used to reach the UK, or about the falsification of documents, such as passports or visas. This decision was based on two considerations; first, as I argued in chapter two, the means and mechanisms of irregular emigration from China was a major preoccupation of early studies in the field and I was unlikely to generate new material on the topic; and, second, I wanted to avoid the acquisition of knowledge that could be used for the purpose of immigration enforcement (a recommendation put forward by Düvell et al., 2010, in their discussion of ethical issues in research with irregular migrants). At the beginning of interviews, several participants asked if I wanted to know how they had travelled to or entered the UK. When I explained that I would not ask about this aspect of their migration journey, they were visibly relieved. My approach, therefore, perhaps helped to develop trust. However, it is possible that by avoiding

questions about the means of entry, an important dimension of Chinese migrants' experience of an undocumented status was omitted from my analysis of the narratives.

#### **8.4 Reflections on the research aim and questions**

In this section, I return to the overarching aim of this thesis: to explore the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. In the discussion that follows, I summarise how my interpretations of Chinese migrants' narratives answered each of the three research questions.

##### **8.4.1 How did Chinese migrants experience the shift to an undocumented status?**

The narratives of Chinese migrants created during this study suggested that the shift to an undocumented or a semi-legal status was a profound and extended event in migrants' life course. For those who had migrated irregularly as an explicit strategy, they experienced disillusion because of the difficulties they encountered finding stable employment and avoiding immigration enforcement. The migration narrative they had believed before they embarked on their journey – that the UK offered the chance to make money (赚钱) quickly – was soon shattered by the reality of their poor economic prospects and job insecurity. This sense of disillusionment resonated with Wang's (2021) account of the suffering of Chinese migrants in Paris. Young migrants who had spent most of their childhoods in the UK experienced the shift to an undocumented status as both a sudden and a protracted process. The realisation that they had grown up into an undocumented status was initially experienced as a shock, but their understanding of the full implications for their lives developed slowly over the course of their late childhood and early adolescence. These formative years became scarred by an unexpected uprooting. They were plucked from their

expected life course and planted on another trajectory which took them away from their peers, their hopes for education, and into the precarious world of work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways. The experiences of the three young migrants in the study echoed many of the key messages about the transition to illegality experienced by other national groups (see, for example, Gonzales, 2011 & 2015 in the US; Hughes, 2022, in the UK). The narratives of migrants subjected to a semi-legal status, such as a temporary work visa, were dominated by the abuse and exploitation they had experienced in the workplace, exacerbated by their insecure legal status which tied them to their employer (an argument advanced by Wu, Guo & Sheehan, 2010).

In all but one of the narratives, the shift to an undocumented status represented a dramatic turning point in which participants had little agency. Other powerful actors, such as migration brokers, employers, lawyers, and immigration officers, appeared to have more control over the legal status of the participants. Narrators' identities were also altered by the change of legal status. Younger participants mourned the loss of the comparatively carefree life they had led before their legal status came to dominate every aspect of their lives. Working-age participants reflected on their naivety prior to making the journey to the UK. The emotional dimensions of this change were at the forefront of the narratives: migrants felt injustice that both their labour and economic contributions to society went unrecognised. Migrants' powerlessness to affect their legal status led to feelings of depression and emotional turmoil. This affective dimension of the shift between immigration statuses on the inner lives and self-representations of migrants has rarely been examined in the existing literature about undocumented Chinese migration.

Interestingly, the narratives about moving between legal statuses were rarely told as individual stories: instead, they were told through plural pronouns, with reference to close family

members, both in China and in the UK. This collective mode of storytelling conveyed the message that family were deeply implicated in the migration journey and experience. Family members motivated or led the initial migration, they were sources of economic and emotional responsibilities, they helped migrants to endure the hardships of irregularity and they were prominent in migrants' plans and dreams. In this respect, the shift to an irregular status was not a move made alone, but a collective event in the interconnected lives of migrants. This finding resonated with the claims made in more recent scholarship about the intersection between migration and family lives (such as Chen, 2019; Lawthom et al., 2013; and Wang, 2021).

#### **8.4.2 How did Chinese migrants experience everyday life with an undocumented status?**

In my interpretation of the narratives in the light of migrants' everyday lives with an undocumented status, I focused on the specific experiences of Chinese women. Although many of the characteristics of an undocumented life were shared by both women and men, I noted particular vulnerabilities for the women migrants who participated in the study. The first vulnerability related to women's roles as mothers. The stories presented in chapter five show how pregnancy and motherhood brought women into contact with immigration authorities and represented crisis in their narratives. Most of the women in the study had left children behind in China. Over time, the emotional distance between migrant parents and their left-behind children grew, as did mothers' feelings of guilt and shame about their inability to fulfil the expectations of their role as mothers (such guilt was not found in the narratives of fathers in the study). Once pregnant, migrant women could not return to China to reunite with the children they had left behind because of the cost and administrative difficulties involved in registering their UK born

children in China's hukou system. However, remaining in the UK meant that their children would grow up into an undocumented status. With no maternity pay, women were forced to leave their employment which meant that the prospect of paying off their migration debts became lower. In this situation, undocumented Chinese women became entrapped between political systems of population control in both the UK and China. The only way to resolve these issues was through the acquisition of a regular status.

The narratives of the three women participants presented in chapter five also provided insight into Chinese women's experiences of work in Chinese restaurants and takeaways. For women who participated in this study, acquiring and maintaining work were high-risk activities. Finding work was most difficult for rural women with limited education and no kitchen or language skills. Once in work, the long hours and heavy demands, the risk of immigration raids, alongside the experience of inter-worker conflict made workplaces both physically and emotionally demanding places. Volatile and hierarchical relationships with colleagues from different national, regional and linguistic backgrounds were made more intense by the lack of escape as most migrants were provided with accommodation as a condition of their employment. The demands of the Chinese restaurant left limited opportunities for migrants to learn English or to develop networks outside of the restaurant or takeaway. These demands also fundamentally changed migrant women's close relationships due to the physical and emotional distance they placed between family members. Although the exploitation of Chinese migrant workers was a major preoccupation of the published literature, the narratives in this study portray the human dimensions of precarious work in Chinese catering and the role of gender in such workplaces. The effect of precarious work on irregular Chinese women's' mental health, relationships, and their self-representations have rarely been portrayed.

In contrast with the fear and insecurity associated with the workplace, I interpreted the Chinese church as a place of refuge and belonging in women's narratives. Chinese women's faith in God and belief in Christian teachings, for some, helped to frame their migration and status journeys as spiritual journeys and gave a higher order meaning and purpose to the struggles they had endured. However, there were limits to the support available through migrants' social networks and church membership. When they faced major life transitions, such as the birth of children, a change in legal status, a family illness or bereavement, or parenting a child with additional needs, women's networks offered little support or experience. This finding resonated with Bloch and McKay (2016) and Bloch et al.'s (2014) studies, which both suggested that undocumented migrants' social networks provided access to limited resources. In contrast with the image created by Pieke et al.'s (2004) study of Fujianese migrants in Europe as transnational, highly mobile and with access to well-resourced networks, I found instead that in the most vulnerable moments in their narratives, Chinese women were forced to face their difficulties alone.

#### **8.4.3 How did Chinese migrants experience the status journey over time?**

Although the study was cross-sectional in design, migrants' narratives covered a wide temporal landscape and captured their experiences of the status journey over time. The narratives presented in chapter six show how the application for the right to remain in the UK involved long periods of waiting which came to dominate migrants' lives. Dealing with immigration systems and officers was also a source of anxiety for migrants. In Yellow Flower's account, her interactions with the Home Office were presented as emotionally painful encounters. She felt both powerless and misrecognised by the official discourse of the Home Office, in which her

complex and multifaceted migration story was constructed in simple terms. Similarly, John, like other participants who had grown up into an undocumented status, was constructed as a ‘temporary’ migrant. The life John had developed, the attachments he had formed, and the contributions he had made were negated by the official misrepresentation of him as temporarily resident in the UK. In response to such official constructions of their lives, participants presented themselves as hard-working, ‘good’ migrants to illustrate that they were deserving of the right to live in the UK. The emotional cost of this mental wrangling with immigration authorities was clear as participants connected these encounters with visceral descriptions of the effect on their physical and mental health. In this state of protracted legal uncertainty, exacerbated by painful interactions with immigration systems, waiting was the only option available to most participants. Yet, the narratives conveyed the harms inflicted on individuals when they waited for a regular permanent status.

The stories presented in chapter six also show how the acquisition of a legal status brought stability and security, but Chinese migrants were left with an ambiguous sense of belonging. In Fei Hong’s narrative, for example, the traditional story structure as outlined by Labov and Waletzky (1967) had been achieved – the narrator moved from exposition to complication to resolution. However, the resolution contained disquieting elements. A permanent legal status had brought psychological wellbeing, but Fei Hong’s social integration into UK society was limited. The economic integration available to Fei Hong – work in the Chinese catering industry – meant he had few opportunities to learn English or to socialise outside of his small Chinese circle. Fei Hong’s narrative also alluded to his perception that racism and resistance further limited his social integration. However, having spent many years in the UK, and made significant personal and family sacrifices to acquire permanent residence, a return to China was unthinkable. The

pace of development in the economy, education and in the built environment in contemporary China were also referenced as barriers to return migration. Participants felt that they had fallen out of sync and no longer fit with the temporal rhythms of Chinese society. The key assumptions of classical assimilation theory – that newcomers assimilate to the mainstream society over time – were challenged by Fei Hong’s story in which the length of time in the UK, and even the acquisition of permanent residence, did not correlate with integration or assimilation. As detailed in chapter two, much of the published literature about undocumented Chinese migrants was preoccupied with migrants’ journeys, arrival, and work. My interpretation of Chinese migrants’ encounters with immigration systems, their experiences of protracted temporary statuses and their longer-term integration adds a temporal dimension to the existing knowledge.

### **8.5 Implications for social work practice**

As noted in the introductory chapter to this thesis, one of the objectives of this study was to acquire knowledge that would develop social workers’ understanding of the circumstances of undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK. When social workers encounter undocumented Chinese migrants in practice, they have limited material upon which to draw to inform their practice. For this reason, I have drawn three implications for professional practice and policy from my analysis of the data set. These practice and policy implications are discussed below, organised around three key themes: relationship-building; safe places and community mediators; and the division of social work from immigration enforcement.

### **8.5.1 Relationship-building**

Social workers who encounter undocumented Chinese migrants in practice are required to develop a relationship as the foundation for professional support. Indeed, the relationship between a social worker and her client(s) is central to ‘good’ social work practice (Cooper et al., 2018, p.13). Despite the centrality of the human relationship to social work practice, there are challenges to social work relationships with people subjected to irregular migration statuses. In a practice context of shrinking resources, the time available to social workers to develop relationships is constrained (Ferguson, 2008). Social workers may become inclined to lean on bureaucratic and policy-derived categories (such as ‘undocumented migrant’, ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’, ‘asylum seeker’) and brief case details to create a quick picture of a migrant clients’ life (an argument made by Kohli, 2006, in relation to the label ‘refugee’). In the sister study to this PhD (Machin & Shardlow 2022, see appendix A), we argued that social workers’ narrative constructions of undocumented migrants (which included Chinese migrants) were “flat” and “weakly drawn” (p.15,1). Professional encounters with undocumented clients occurred in emergency circumstances and in liminal places which prohibited relationship-building. Social workers had limited access to information about migrants’ lives or the networks that had sustained them prior to their encounter with the service. Further, social workers alluded to a series of powerful individuals, including clients’ spouses, migration brokers and employers, who held power over the undocumented client but who operated away from the social workers’ gaze. We called these powerful individuals “off-stage actors” (Machin & Shardlow, 2022, p.11). Migrants’ fears of revealing the off-stage actors prohibited the development of trust between social workers and migrant clients. In the light of these challenges to relationship building, drawn from social workers’ narratives, I now draw on Chinese migrants’ narratives to describe

two factors that may contribute to the complexity of the relationship between social workers and undocumented Chinese clients: limited knowledge of social work; and the emotional effect of open-ended liminality.

First, an important finding of this study was that undocumented Chinese migrants had limited awareness of social work as a professional practice. As detailed in chapters one and three, this early finding changed the course of the study and the research design and focus. Those who had migrated to the UK from Fujian were unlikely to have experienced professional welfare services as such infrastructures are underdeveloped, especially in rural Fujian. Although social work has developed at pace in areas such as Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, participants who had migrated from these areas, or their neighbouring regions (such as Tianjin) still had limited understanding, which perhaps reflected the development of social work in those areas at the time of their departure from China. During their migration journeys, the participants in this study had encountered a series of other professionals and civil society actors, which included: immigration officers, detention centre staff, lawyers, healthcare workers, teachers, religious leaders and community and church volunteers. An early step in the development of the social worker-undocumented client relationship will necessitate social workers differentiating their role and remit from that of these other professionals. This may involve reassurances, on the one hand, that the primary goal of social work is not to enforce immigration policies. On the other hand, the role of social workers employed in statutory settings is likely to require clear explanation and differentiation from immigration officers.

Second, in chapter seven, I argued that undocumented Chinese migrants experienced a form of open-ended liminality. Being subjected to irregular migration statuses over many years left many participants in legal limbo: they were physically present, but legally deportable and with

limited rights. This condition of legal liminality affected migrants' sense of time: migrants became trapped in the present, on a life path that had diverged from their expectations, and unable to look to the future. Migrants responded to the experience of open-ended liminality with a sense of unease and insecurity, afraid that they and their families would be unexpectedly uprooted at any time. The threat of immigration raids and the insecurity of employment in the informal co-ethnic economy also created a strong sense of fear. In this emotional state, undocumented migrants are likely to be wary of unknown professionals (a finding that resonated with Slayter and Križ's 2015 study of undocumented Latinos in North America). Social workers employed by government agencies are likely to be conflated with immigration enforcement officers. Social workers should prepare for the investment of time required to develop supportive relationships for effective practice with undocumented Chinese migrants. Additionally, social workers may draw on the literature and practice methods developed in relation to people in liminal states due to life crisis, major transitions and illness (see, for example, Wilson's 2020 work about social work with cancer survivors and Glynn & Maycock's, 2021 study about the experience of leaving care).

### **8.5.2 Safe places and community mediators**

As detailed in chapter six, undocumented Chinese migrants did not experience unease or fear everywhere. For some participants, the Chinese church emerged as a 'safe place' in which they took refuge, developed friendships, received practical support, and found meaning in the hardships they had endured. Professionals who aim to develop trust with undocumented Chinese migrants would benefit from engaging with the places in which migrants felt safe and at ease. Like the church and the Chinese community centre, both of which were sites of the study, safe

places for undocumented Chinese migrants are likely to be: not affiliated with government; sources of practical support and resources; and places in which Chinese languages are spoken. Local authorities with high numbers of Chinese residents, Chinese religious institutions, or Chinese community centres in their area, may fruitfully explore ways to develop connections with such organisations. Through such connections, social work teams may raise awareness amongst Chinese individuals of migrants' rights and eligibility for services.

Additionally, professionals need to take account of the places within which undocumented Chinese migrants felt unsafe. Workplaces, especially Chinese restaurants and takeaways, were described as hierarchical places of conflict, fear and exploitation in which migrants felt unsafe. Social workers should avoid assumptions about solidarity or support between Chinese workers which may not take account of the heterogeneous nature and history of the UK Chinese population, or the nature of work in the informal economy.

In addition to the use of safe places, professionals may also benefit from the development of relationships with 'community mediators'. I use the term 'community mediators' to refer to the civil actors I met during fieldwork who had established relationships with undocumented Chinese migrants (such as Chinese community workers, church leaders and volunteers). In chapter three, I reflected on the importance of relationships and the strength of social ties in the success of the recruitment strategy for this study. My professional contacts with Chinese community leaders and the introductions to church leaders were central to the recruitment of all but one of the participants. This fieldwork observation was aligned with the wider literature related to older Chinese migrants with settled status in the UK. For example, in their study of older Chinese migrants' access to health and care services in the UK, Liu, Cook and Cattani (2017) coined the term "Bridge People" who, according to the authors, bridged the

communication gap between services and Chinese older migrants (p.6). ‘Bridge people’ included family members, friends, public sector officers and Chinese organisation staff. Importantly, they were multilingual, they charged no fee for their support, and they were trusted by older Chinese migrants. These characteristics of Bridge People applied to the community mediators who facilitated recruitment in this study. For social workers who seek to develop a professional relationship with undocumented Chinese migrants, the use of community mediators to gain trust is likely a productive course of action. To successfully connect undocumented Chinese migrants with social services, social workers should seek out community mediators who have Chinese language skills, established relationships of trust with undocumented migrants and who do not charge either a monetary or a social debt for their support.

### **8.5.3 The separation of social work from immigration enforcement**

Two prerequisites for the recommendations above are that; first, social workers are not directly involved in immigration enforcement; and second, the information that social workers acquire about undocumented migrants is not shared with immigration authorities for enforcement purposes. Unfortunately, the direction of professional practice appears to be moving in the opposite direction. Social workers in the UK, along with other professionals and civil actors, are increasingly drawn into the surveillance of irregular migrants and asked to draw the boundaries of citizenship in practices that Yuval-Davies, Wemyss & Cassidy (2018) termed “everyday bordering” (p.229). Under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (Schedule 3), local authorities (which include social services) must inform the Home Office if a person in the area applies for assistance, and they are known to be unlawfully residing in the UK. Further, Jolly and Lind (2021) found that the use of pre-screening tools to identify migrants with an

irregular status before assessment of need and the co-location of immigration officers within social work teams had become routine practice in some local authorities in England. These and other bordering practices created ethical challenges for social workers: an experience that, in the sister study to this doctoral research, we identified as a form of ‘moral distress’ (drawing on Weinberg, 2009) given the differences between social workers’ personal ethics and the professional mandates to which they were subjected (Machin & Shardlow, 2022, p.17).

To extricate social workers from practices of everyday bordering, I follow Hermansson, Lundberg, Gruber, Jolly, Lind, Righard & Scott’s (2020) recommendation for the introduction of a firewall between social services and immigration authorities. Hermansson et al. (2020) defined firewalls as both principles and practices that: “prohibit information sharing about undocumented migrants between social rights providers and immigration control authorities and limit the ability of the latter to conduct immigration control inside or within the vicinity of social rights providers’ facilities” (p.2). Hermansson et al. (2020) argued that firewalls operate at the level of ‘personal attitude’, ‘informal policy’, ‘formal policy’ and ‘national and international law’ (pp.9-10). Whilst social workers in the UK who hold liberal attitudes toward undocumented migration are likely to be acting in line with firewall principles, there are no formal policy or legal firewall principles currently in place for undocumented migrants in the UK. This means that the social rights that undocumented migrants are entitled to are likely difficult to access due to migrants’ fear that contact with services will be shared with immigration authorities.

To extend Hermansson et al.’s (2020) argument further, my interpretations of migrants’ narratives indicated that firewalls should also be applied to other areas of civil society, including NGOs and religious institutions. Individuals within the Chinese church and Chinese community centre visited during fieldwork had, informally, erected firewalls to protect their service users

from immigration enforcement. The introduction of formal legal and policy firewalls between immigration authorities and civil society would ensure the protection of undocumented Chinese migrants' rights. If the UK government were to formalise existing firewall practices, social workers would be better positioned to develop relationships with undocumented migrants via the 'safe places' in civil society. These legal and policy recommendations, if enacted, would help the most vulnerable undocumented Chinese migrants to access a safety net in the event of unmet need, exploitation, or abuse.

### **8.6 Developing the research idea through further study**

This thesis does not presume to be the final story about Chinese migrants' experiences of an undocumented status. In accordance with the tradition of narrative inquiry, this thesis invites both alternative interpretations of the data set presented, and new stories, located within the knowledge gaps identified, which represent paths for future research. In chapter one, I described the 'research paths not taken' in the early stages of this study, which included an explicit focus on Chinese young people who grew up into an undocumented status during the transition to adulthood. Although I have, in this study, touched upon the impact of an undocumented status on the life course of Chinese young people, there is scope for further research on the intersection of Chinese ethnicity, youth and migration controls, to be developed with reference to the emerging North American literature. The need to develop the knowledge base for social work practice with undocumented Chinese migrants also remains. Further inquiry into both the social needs of undocumented Chinese migrants, and the specific challenges and opportunities for professional practice with Chinese individuals subject to migration controls is required. Such work needs to take place within a critique of the conflicting legal and policy mandates which currently frame

professional practice with irregular migrants. The role of Chinese faith groups and Chinese community places could also be explored as part of a broader research programme about the community support and resources available for undocumented Chinese migrants.

Finally, both the empirical and the conceptual findings of this study paint a picture of the urgent mental health needs of undocumented Chinese migrants. Long term conditions of emotional unease, liminal legal and social positions, disruptions in temporal expectations, and the hardships of insecure employment imbued the narratives. The ‘hot and bitter tears’ of participants stories, created by the social and emotional suffering, left emotional scars. Limited interactions with health and social services, combined with limited knowledge of services, meant that participants were left to manage their mental health issues alone, or within their families, without formal support. Since the fieldwork for this study was concluded, Chinese migrants with an irregular status are likely to have experienced additional difficulties due to the restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the evidence of increased racist attacks on Chinese individuals. For this reason, the mental health needs and support preferences of undocumented Chinese migrants require further examination.

## **8.7 Conclusion**

To conclude this thesis, I first return to my central argument and then reflect on the final representation of participants’ lives in this text. I have argued that Chinese migrants’ experiences of an undocumented status in the UK can be understood in relation to the concept of liminality. Undocumented Chinese migrants were ‘betwixt and between’ in terms of their legal status, the social and economic environments in which their narratives were set, and their subjective experiences of time. This experience of liminality was not a fixed period in Chinese migrants’

lives, but an open-ended experience that, for most participants, extended over many years. The stories of ‘hot and bitter tears’ that related to the shift to an undocumented status, everyday life with an undocumented status and the status journey over time, were deeply connected with migrants’ experiences of open-ended liminality.

Hydén (2014) argued that narrative inquiries that engage with participants who experienced obvious structural inequalities run the risk of representing participants’ lives as overly focused on hardships at the expense of resilience and resistance. By focusing solely on suffering, researchers can create injurious texts which work to stereotype their participants (a warning deployed by bell hooks, 1999). The narratives created during this study involved poignant moments that were heavy with sadness and loss: participants recalled grief, recounted hardships, and spoke passionately of the injustices and misrepresentations they had experienced. However, participants also shared stories of resistance, of finding meaning through hardship, of the joy of reunification with long separated children and spouses, of friendships forged in difficult circumstances, of spiritual fellowship and solace, and of hope in uncertainty. In the final text, I hope to have conveyed both the ‘hot and bitter tears’ of undocumented Chinese migrants’ stories, alongside their agency, resilience, and perseverance.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Research outputs

Publication: The construction of character in social work narratives of practice with undocumented migrants

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# The Construction of Character in Social Work Narratives of Practice with Undocumented Migrants

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## Abstract

Undocumented migration is a global phenomenon. Social work practice with undocumented migrants, worldwide, is ethically complex as social workers are positioned between the mandates of the state, designed to deter 'illegal' migration and the needs of their undocumented clients. Yet, despite this complexity, the relationship between social workers and their undocumented clients remains largely unexamined. In this article, we draw on interviews with thirteen social workers to analyse how character is constructed in narratives of practice with undocumented migrants. We have used narrative analysis to explore: the relationship between social workers and their undocumented clients; the influence of other key actors and social workers' constructions of their own practice. We identified three key findings from our analysis: (i) the emergency circumstances in which social workers encounter undocumented migrants made it difficult to establish relationships and consequently, undocumented migrants were weakly drawn in social workers' narratives; (ii) off-stage actors who existed outside of social workers' gaze (migrants' relatives, employers and migrant brokers) exerted power over undocumented migrants and inhibited trusting relationships with professionals and (iii) tension between social workers' moral claims about undocumented migrants and their personal empathy led to the construction of social workers as characters enmeshed in emotional conflict.

**Keywords:** character, narrative analysis, relationship, social work, undocumented migrants

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## Introduction

Undocumented migration is a global phenomenon and, worldwide, undocumented migrants experience multiple harms, including trauma and death during migration journeys (Cornelius, 2001; Allsopp and Chase, 2019); precarious and exploitative employment (Massey and Gentsch, 2014; Bloch and McKay, 2015); difficulties accessing mainstream services and healthcare (Calain-Watanabe and Lee, 2012; Cheong and Massey, 2019) and fear of detention, deportation and destitution (Bloch and Schuster, 2005; Andersson, 2014), which may lead to chronic stress that affects daily life (Gonzales and Chavez, 2012; Sigona, 2012).

Traditionally, governments have responded to undocumented migration with policies designed to reduce the movement of people through securitisation of borders, soft bordering initiatives, such as involving citizens and civil servants in immigration checks (Yuval-Davis *et al.*, 2018), and by regularising the status of those unlawfully resident (Chamie, 2020). Social workers play a vital role in both the enactment of soft-bordering policies and distribution of state welfare to undocumented migrants in need. Yet, social work practice with undocumented migrants is both under-theorised and under-researched.

In this article, we contribute to the nascent literature about social work practice with undocumented migrants. First, we describe the UK context and locate this study within existing social work literature about practice with undocumented migrants. Next, we explore social workers' accounts of their practice with undocumented migrants using our approach to narrative analysis. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings, pointing to the insights about the relationship between social workers and their undocumented clients.

## The UK context

In England, social work is a protected occupation: registered social workers (with a specialist regulator, Social Work England) are employed by regional government agencies (known as local authorities), health services, NGOs or private and independent businesses. Two key pieces of legislation (Children Act 1989; Care Act 2014) define social workers' responsibilities for children and adults. Undocumented migrants in the UK, numbering approximately 800,000 to 1.2 million (Connor and Passel, 2019), are eligible for services under these Acts if they have relevant care and support needs. However, many migrants with an irregular status are ineligible for state financial support (a condition known as 'no recourse to public funds' or 'NRPF'; see UKVI, 2016). With limited statutory guidance, social workers are left to interpret how services,

designed for UK subjects, might fit the needs of undocumented migrants.

## Social work and undocumented migration

The nascent literature about undocumented migrants falls in four broad domains: policy impact, access to services, ethics and professional practice.

### Policy impact

It is well established in the existing literature about social work and undocumented migration that professional practice takes place in the context of contradictory laws and policies (see [Briskman and Zion, 2014](#), in Australia; [Bracci and Valzania, 2015](#), in Italy; [Nordling, 2017](#), in Sweden and [Jolly, 2018](#), in the UK). In many national contexts, undocumented migrants are excluded from welfare by immigration laws, yet eligible for support from social service organisations because of other social statuses, such as being: a child or unaccompanied minor; in poverty or destitute ([Farmer 2017](#); [Nordling, 2017](#); [Jolly, 2018](#)); subject to domestic abuse ([Bhuyan, 2012](#)) or homeless ([Cuadra, 2015](#)). In England, undocumented migrants are excluded from most mainstream benefits, from social housing and they are unable to legally work or rent accommodation, but they are entitled to primary healthcare and compulsory education ([Jolly, 2018](#)).

### Access to services

Studies that have examined undocumented migrants' experiences of social service organisations have presented a largely negative view of professional practice. Undocumented migrants have been: offered insufficient levels of support to meet need; wrongly refused support and sometimes threatened with the removal of their children by child welfare agencies ([Farmer, 2017](#); [Jolly, 2018](#)). Consequently, children and families have been left in: poverty ([Jolly, 2018](#)); inappropriate accommodation ([Price and Spencer, 2015](#)) and at risk of exploitation ([Dexter \*et al.\*, 2016](#)). Factors that have been found to affect access to services include migrants' linguistic ability; availability of language services, migrant knowledge and experience of social care systems and social worker knowledge of migrant's rights ([Ayón, 2009](#); [Bhuyan, 2012](#); [Bracci and Valzania, 2015](#)). Such limited and poor-quality provision has been described as 'statutory neglect' in the UK context ([Jolly, 2018](#), p. 190).

## Ethics

It is evident from the literature that practice with undocumented migrants presents ethical challenges for social workers due to conflicts of loyalty between employer or state and the undocumented migrant (Briskman and Zion, 2014). For example, to report undocumented migrants to immigration authorities may contradict professional values (Furman *et al.*, 2012). To ignore migration law may be beneficial to individual undocumented service users but may compromise service delivery or place social workers at risk of unemployment (Bhuyan, 2012; Furman *et al.*, 2012). To address these challenges, social workers have been found to adopt discretionary practices. Nordling (2017) and Jönsson (2014) framed social workers' discretion as a powerful mode of practice, capable of disrupting normative categories of citizen/noncitizen. However, whilst discretionary practices may benefit individuals, they do not challenge the exclusionary laws which create undocumented migrants' vulnerability (Bhuyan, 2012).

## Professional practice

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is ample evidence that undocumented migrants were afraid to approach or trust social workers due to fear of detention and deportation (Križ and Skivenes, 2012; Slaytor and Križ, 2015). Migrants' 'home country' experiences of coercive state control inhibited relationships with professionals in 'host countries'; similarly, cultural differences in help-seeking prevented undocumented migrants from accessing support (Earner, 2007). There is evidence that social worker attitudes to migration affect working relationships with undocumented migrants. Bhuyan *et al.* (2012) found that good knowledge of immigration law predicted more favourable responses to undocumented migrants. Social workers whose role perception was bounded by national laws and resources were less favourably inclined towards undocumented migrants, compared with those with expansive views of social work grounded on human rights and social justice, who tended to exceed their professional mandate (Cuadra and Staaf, 2014; Nordling, 2017). Social worker attitudes to deservingness also shape perceptions. For example, Mexican migrants in the US with good knowledge of social care systems were perceived as 'working the system' (Ayón, 2009, p. 613); whilst positive constructions of deservingness, often of children, led to more favourable professional responses (Nordling, 2017). It is noteworthy that several authors have framed the face-to-face social worker/undocumented migrant encounter as a site for structural change. For Briskman and Zion (2014) this was political change through social workers bearing witness to the suffering of undocumented migrants. However, no study

has, to date, examined the relationship between social workers and undocumented migrants in depth.

The social work literature has tended to focus on practice with undocumented individuals or families, whilst studies from the broader migration literature have emphasised that migration is rarely a solo project: other key actors, such as migrant brokers and smugglers (Sanchez, 2017), employers and migrants' social contacts (Bloch and McKay, 2015), play an important role in undocumented migrants' everyday lives, about which the social work literature is largely silent. In this article, we have sought to address these gaps in the literature through examination of: relationships between social workers and undocumented migrants; other key actors in migrants' networks and emotional dimensions of ethical challenges involved in practice with undocumented migrants. We suggest that this study offers methodological uniqueness. We have adopted close narrative analysis, an approach not yet deployed in existing literature, that provides a method to weave together subjective experiences within the structural conditions in which practice occurs.

### Research aims

The overarching aim of this article is to explore social workers' relationships with and constructions of undocumented migrants by examining three questions: how do social workers construct;

1. the character of undocumented migrants?
2. the 'off stage' characters in undocumented migrants' lives (e.g. smugglers, employers and family members)?
3. their practice with undocumented migrants?

### Methods

#### Capturing character through narrative analysis

Social workers tell stories about the individuals with whom they work and the circumstances they encounter (Hall, 1997). These stories are powerful as they convince different audiences about realities of service users' lives and appropriate professional responses (Hall, 1997; Baldwin, 2013). The human relationships constructed through story telling provide a central focus of narrative enquiry (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). Given our aim to explore the relationships involved in social work with undocumented migrants, we have selected narrative analysis to examine the construction of character in social workers' accounts of practice.

We have focused on three key characters in these narratives: (i) the main character (undocumented migrants); (ii) the off-stage characters

(those involved in undocumented migrant's social networks) and (iii) the helping character (social workers). To describe the relationships between these characters, we use the analogy of actors on the stage. The undocumented characters were the protagonists of each account and were positioned centre stage. The off-stage characters were a cast of secondary actors whose actions took place beyond the reach of the social workers' narratives. The helping characters in the accounts were social workers. We have avoided privileging the social worker voice as narrative author and, instead, we have examined the social worker as a character constructed through the texts. Finally, we position ourselves, the social science readers of the accounts, as the audience, with a role in construction and interpretation of character. Following from literary theory—Barthes' (1977) notion of the 'death of the author' and, subsequent, 'the birth of the reader'—we suggest that our reading of the social work accounts is an interpretative act (p. 148). Again, following Barthes' argument that 'the Text is plural' and irreducible to a single meaning, we acknowledge the scope for alternative interpretations by subsequent readers and this has guided our decision to present lengthy extracts of narrative in this article (1977, p. 5).

### The site of the study

The study took place in England and most participants were employed by either government agencies ( $n=9$ ) or NGOs ( $n=4$ ) in the North-West and Midlands (see Table 1). Most interviews took place at participants' place of work, one interview took place at the first author's university office and one interview was conducted via telephone. Participants were employed in different service areas (seven specialist migration-related roles; six statutory child welfare and adult enablement roles).

**Table 1.** Participant information.

Pseudonym	Gender/age/ethnicity	Employer/practice type	Years in practice
Robert	M/53/White British	NHS Trust/Adults	21
Stephen	M/46/Chinese	NGO/Community work	6
Rebwar	M/45/Black African	NGO/Advice and support	6
Tom	M/27/White British	NGO/Advice and support	3
Bob	M/53/White British	Government/Children	10
Simon	M/37/White British	Government/Children	4
Marie	F/32/White British	Government/Children	1
Doris	F/62/White British	NGO/Advice and support	39
Debbie	F/27/White British	Government/Adults	7
Sarah	F/46/White British	Government/Adults	12
DJA	F/50/White British	Government/Children	2
Winston	F/51/White British	Government/Adults	5
Jane	F/48/White British	Government/Adults	5

## Participants

A convenience sample of thirteen participants was recruited via snowball sampling. Principal Social Workers (experienced practitioners with strategic responsibilities) attached to teaching partnerships in England circulated invitations to participate in the study to practitioners in government agencies (nine social workers responded). The first author recruited four participants from NGOs with expertise in practice with migrant groups. Participants were selected if they were: (i) registered social workers and (ii) able to discuss an experience of practice with an undocumented individual or family. Participants had varied experience in practice with undocumented migrants (from the expert to the novice). As detailed in Table 1, eleven participants identified as 'White British' and two participants identified as 'Chinese' and 'African'. All names used in this article are pseudonyms, selected by participants. Given our analytical approach, we decided that thirteen participants were sufficient to reach conceptual depth (Nelson, 2017).

## Interviews

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews which lasted, on average, 50 min (shortest 32, longest 107 min). Participants were asked to 'tell the story of a case involving practice with an undocumented individual/family'. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## Analysis

We conducted the analysis in three steps, as follows.

Step 1: The first author listened to audio recordings of interviews in full and conducted readings of interview transcripts to develop data familiarity. We then identified the storied parts of the interviews and, following the approaches of Gee (1991), Mishler (1991) and Riessman (1993), created a condensed representation of each narrative in verse, organised into a series of stanzas. To create each verse, we distilled social workers' statements into single line clauses with the aim of capturing the essence of the spoken word. We then arranged these clauses, whilst listening to the audio recordings of social workers' accounts, into stanzas to create a narrative which represents our analytic view of social workers' construction of character. This approach has allowed us to present a large amount of information in a limited number of words, which maintains the rhythm of the original speech.

Step 2: We conducted detailed analysis of the stanzas through a series of questions adapted from Riessman (2008): (i) who were the principal characters in each narrative and what 'character work' was conducted to create these characters? (ii) how do characters interact? and (iii) what is the moral of the story and what moral claims are made?

Step 3: We generated themes by comparing how narratives revealed constructions of character.

### Ethical considerations

Scholarly examination of undocumented migration risks revealing the identity of migrants and their 'illegal' status, which has serious implications for individuals who actively conceal their status to avoid enforcement action. Elsewhere, we have written about the ethical barriers involved in research with undocumented migrants who are, by necessity, a hidden social group (Machin and Shardlow, 2018). The 'rich description' involved in narrative research and the focus on character in this article increased this risk. To mitigate this risk, we asked social work participants not to reveal the names of the undocumented migrants with whom they worked. Pseudonyms (selected by interviewees) were used for all participants and for the undocumented clients discussed during interviews and written consent to participate was acquired. Following the transcription of interviews, the first author removed information which could identify social work participants and their clients from the data set. These procedures to ensure anonymity of both social workers and their undocumented clients were approved in advance by Keele University.

### Findings

Our analysis of the depiction of character in social workers' accounts of practice with undocumented migrants has been organised around the construction of three key characters:

1. the main character;
2. the off-stage characters and
3. the helping character.

Although all thirteen practice narratives informed our analysis, we have selected three extended extracts that typify how each character was constructed and allow readers of the article to engage with our close analysis of language, context and structure.

### The construction of the main character

Undocumented migrants were the main characters in social workers' practice accounts: these characters were constructed through narrators' descriptive clauses, the sequencing of events and the spaces in which the narratives were set. The following extract from an interview with Doris, a white British woman, an experienced service manager employed by a NGO, contained a typical construction of an undocumented client. Doris' orientation to the narrative began with a description of how her agency initially encountered an undocumented Chinese woman and her children.

Extract 1

she was literally dumped on our doorstep  
herself and her two little children

I think there was a babe in arms who was probably less than a year  
and a toddler of between two and three

her and her children and her black bin bags of stuff arrived outside our  
door

we discovered that she was the wife of a Chinese man who had made an  
asylum claim

she had absolutely no idea what the status of that asylum claim was  
he disappeared

I have no idea what happened

I'm not sure we ever discovered all of that

they'd been living in a flat and she could no longer pay for it because  
she had nothing

no money coming in, no idea, she didn't know what to do at all

spoke no English

and her children didn't either

and she just got dumped

I'm not sure we even knew who dumped her

it may have been the landlord of the property they were living in

the flat above a shop or restaurant or something

and he just dropped her there

In Doris' account the main character, the undocumented Chinese woman, was characterised through a brief description of her circumstances. Having been 'dumped' at the door of Doris' agency, the narrator described her destitution. Through force of utterance, Doris emphasised the lack of economic and social resources available to the woman in a

series of descriptive clauses where ‘no’ and ‘nothing’ were repeated several times: ‘she had nothing, no money coming in, no idea, she didn’t know what to do at all, spoke no English and her children didn’t either’. The use of dramatic language in the extract, such as ‘dumped’ (repeated three times) and ‘dropped’ (repeated twice) and the circularity of the extract where the words ‘dumped’ and ‘dropped’ both began and ended the description of the main character, created a sense of desperation and suggested that no one was willing to take responsibility for the undocumented woman and her children. Doris noted that the woman’s possessions were in bin bags, an image that suggested little dignity. Similar images were used in other practice accounts to describe the desperate circumstances of undocumented clients. For example, Robert, an experienced local government social worker, described the sum of an undocumented client’s belongings after ten years in the UK as ‘just a tiny little toiletries bag and a few papers’.

Doris’ description suggested that the undocumented woman had limited agency. Her immigration status was dependent on her husband’s asylum claim and his disappearance had left the woman and her children destitute. She was constructed as a woman with limited understanding of her own status in the emphatic clause, ‘she had absolutely no idea what the status of that [her husband’s] asylum claim was’. By emphasising that the client had two young children, one of whom was a ‘babe in arms’, Doris created the image of a woman who, quite literally, had her hands full and would therefore have limited resources to resolve her own status issues.

Doris’ construction of the undocumented woman’s character implied that the relationship between the social worker and the client was limited. Doris used language that indicated her uncertainty about the details of the case, such as ‘I think’, ‘I have no idea’, ‘I’m not sure’, ‘it may have been’. Similar expressions of uncertainty were found in other practice accounts. In extract 1, the space where the initial encounter was set, the doorway of Doris’ agency, created a sense of liminality. The undocumented woman was situated in an in-between space, where the networks and resources that had sustained her life prior to the referral were no longer available. Interestingly, in Doris’ full account, all subsequent scenes took place in or on the threshold of social work offices. Possibly, these liminal spaces made it difficult for Doris to develop a meaningful relationship with the woman and to become familiar with her everyday experiences.

### The construction of the off-stage characters

Social workers’ practice narratives included a cast of secondary characters whose actions affected the construction of the main characters.

These characters, including undocumented migrants' spouses, parents, siblings and the people involved in facilitating migration journeys, were located firmly in the background of the practice accounts. They were constructed through the retelling of action that occurred outside of the social workers' narratives. These 'off-stage' actors and their actions appeared to have considerable power over the undocumented migrants at the centre of the narratives.

The following extract, which is taken from Winston's account of practice with two undocumented Vietnamese young people, conveys the power imbalance between off stage actors and main characters. Winston, a female, White British, experienced social worker in a specialist team working with unaccompanied minors, began working with the two young people when they were discovered during a police raid on a nail bar where they lived and worked. As the relationship between Winston and the young people developed, several background characters came into the frame.

Extract 2

they'd travelled from Vietnam  
a long journey in the back of lorries  
they said they were squashed down by boxes  
hidden underneath items  
the girl said to me  
they'd gone into this house that was in the middle of nowhere  
she said that there were lots of older men there  
that she was raped on several occasions  
...  
she met this boyfriend who offered her the opportunity to work  
he gave her money  
to get on a train  
she was picked up at a station  
she was taken to the nail bar  
it was already prearranged for her

The extract provided a window into networks that facilitate and sustain undocumented migration. The account revealed that organised networks, operating outside of the frame of the social worker's gaze, brought these young people from Vietnam to the UK and arranged their work in exploitative labour systems. This network involved abuse, such as the young woman's sexual abuse during her journey to the UK. Other practice narratives referred to the routine sexual abuse of women, both during migration journeys and, also, after their arrival in the UK.

Winston constructed the two young people, in particular, the young woman, as passive in relation to the off-stage actors who were active and held considerable power over her. This was evident in the description of two significant journeys: one long and dangerous journey from Vietnam to the UK and one ‘pre-arranged’ train journey that moved the young woman from London to the North of England for ‘work’ purposes (she described evidence that the young woman had been subject to repeated sexual exploitation in the flat above the nail bar). Winston constructed the young woman as without agency; these journeys happened to the young woman, over which she appeared to have little control. Embedded in the structure of the narrative about these two journeys, Winston used a series of passive sentences that described how the young woman was moved, first across international borders and then within the UK. She was ‘squashed down by boxes’, ‘hidden’ in the lorry, ‘taken’ and ‘picked up’ along the way. However, the agentic, background characters, namely the traffickers—older males who sexually abused her during the journey and the boyfriend who arranged her employment—were only briefly sketched in Winston’s account. The spaces in which these scenes took place, the back of a lorry and an unknown house in an unknown country, conjure images of darkness and danger. These were unknown places without discernible characteristics that could bring the spaces to light or the abusers to account.

### The construction of the helping character

The social worker played the role of the helping character in the practice accounts, constructed through the moral claims made about the main characters. Almost always, depictions of character in narratives involve moral formulations, which relate to the narrator’s presentation of self (Riessman, 2000). Social workers made a series of moral claims about the undocumented migrants with whom they worked: these claims were located on a continuum between migrants constructed either as wholly blameless or wholly culpable for their migration status. Such moral claims were rarely fixed, as the constructions of undocumented migrants shifted within practice narratives.

The next extract conveyed an explicit example of a narrator who blamed their undocumented client for their status. Such an explicit attribution of blame was rare in the study. However, the extract demonstrated the emotional complexity that this moral claim created for the social worker, also found more implicitly in other narratives. The extract is taken from a government social worker’s account of work with an Indian undocumented woman, waiting to be deported. This was the social worker’s only experience of practice with an undocumented migrant.

Extract 3

the decision was already made from the Home Office that this lady's  
going to be deported

before I even got involved in the case

she'd been living here for 16 years

for the past six years

she hadn't been following the protocols

signing at the police station

so it was very difficult

...

on a work level

without sounding awful [pause]

it is her own fault

but then the personal side of me

she hasn't got a bank

she's got no money

she can't even go to the shop for a loaf of bread

she can't buy make up

have some shoes

all them little things

even though I know on the legal side she hasn't obliged

on the personal side

I find that really difficult

I feel awful for her

she's in that situation because she chose to be

I do feel sympathetic towards her

I found that very very difficult

...

but the difficulty is

it has come out that she hasn't got any care needs

I find that difficult

she's still in that situation

I'm going to close the case

it's not going to go away

...

I've learnt a lot from the case

it does make you see things differently

you hear about cases and you hear situations  
but until you've done one yourself  
it's hard to explain  
you do feel more for people  
...  
she doesn't understand that it's her own fault  
I don't want to say that but it's true  
she could have easily just gone to the [police] station and just signed  
she'd have her status  
"you have caused it yourself"

The social worker began the narrative by absolving herself of responsibility, both for the client's migration status and the Home Office's decision to deport her, which predated the social worker's involvement. By removing herself from the decision, she created opportunity within the narrative to attribute blame elsewhere—to the undocumented woman. The connection between the undocumented client's lack of compliance with a weekly requirement to sign in at a police station and the decision to deport her seemed overly simplistic. Nonetheless, the social worker returned repeatedly to this attribution of blame and to confirm her lack of involvement. Debbie demonstrated awareness that her moral claims about the woman may be poorly received—'without sounding awful [pause], it is her own fault'. The pause suggested that Debbie considered her audience's likely response before the attribution of blame. Awareness of the performative nature of the interviews and an interest in presenting a positive self was common when social workers made moral judgements about undocumented clients in their narratives.

In the second verse, the focus shifted from attributing blame to empathy for the undocumented client, due to her destitute circumstances. The social worker moved between blame and empathy throughout the verse. Debbie dealt with this tension by describing her personal and her professional self as two separate identities. Her professional identity accepted that the undocumented woman would be deported because of her lack of compliance with the conditions of her status. However, personally, she wished to use her own resources to meet her client's pressing material needs. This division between the personal and the professional to resolve tension between blame and empathy was a common strategy used in other practice narratives. Debbie's emotional response to the undocumented woman's circumstances was expressed through repetition of the evaluative clauses 'I found that very difficult' and 'I found that really hard'. Almost mirroring a poetic refrain, Debbie repeated these two sentences twenty-three times, punctuating her full narrative with this expression of her emotional experience. The attribution of blame was

further complicated by the final two verses where Debbie suggested that working with an undocumented migrant makes you 'see things differently' and 'feel more for people'. There is a sense that Debbie's preconceived ideas about undocumented migrants were abstract, whereas encountering an undocumented migrant face-to-face and developing a relationship had complicated her conceptions. However, the final line returned to the attribution of blame, this time directed at the undocumented client as though Debbie were invoking a conversation with her: 'you have caused it yourself'. By using the linguistic device of reported speech and enacting a conversation with the undocumented client, Debbie again resolved the emotional tension arising from her personal empathy for the woman and her repeated attribution of blame.

## Discussion

In the following section, we examine: how the construction of character in these accounts relates to professional practice; gaps in the construction of character and alternative characterisations. We suggest what these gaps may imply for professional practice.

### The main character and alternative readings

Undocumented migrants were weakly drawn in social workers' narratives. In literary criticism, a distinction is made between 'flat' and 'round' characters (Chatman, 1978). A flat character is described in little detail, with one or two key traits that sum up their entire characterisation. By contrast, a round character is complex, ambiguous and described in life-like terms that create a sense of familiarity. We suggest that social workers' characterisation of undocumented migrants was mostly flat, with just one or two discerning features, usually relating to destitution and desperate need for help. Despite their position centre stage in the narratives, undocumented migrants rarely drove the plot forward and, instead, the plot was based on the actions of off-stage characters and the helping character.

This flat characterisation suggests that there was little sense of a developed relationship between social workers and undocumented service users. The invocation of liminal spaces, such as doorways in Doris' account and, in the other accounts, ambulances and police custody suites, strengthens the sense that the relationship between social workers and undocumented migrants lacked familiarity. These spaces were also associated with emergency circumstances and short-term interventions. Social workers were largely unable to access the homes where undocumented service users had been living prior to the referral to social

services. The 'home visit', recognised in the broader professional literature as a site where social work is constructed and relationships are forged (Ferguson, 2018), was mentioned in just one of the thirteen narratives, echoing previous studies which have suggested that there were barriers to relationship building between social workers and undocumented migrants (Ayón, 2009; Križ and Skivenes, 2012; Slayter and Križ, 2015).

Gaps in the construction of undocumented migrants open opportunities for exploration of alternative readings. In Doris' narrative, the undocumented woman was presented as lacking agency. Information about her pre-migratory experiences, journey to and arrival in the UK and how she had lived under the radar of state services prior to her husband's disappearance, were missing from the account. The wider literature about undocumented migration, whilst not denying the harms of undocumented status, has suggested a complex picture of agency. Elsewhere, undocumented migrants have been characterised as actors with agency in migration decisions, skilled at navigating social networks to maximise support and conceal their status (Bloch *et al.*, 2014).

### The off-stage character and alternative readings

We suggest that the off-stage characters in social worker's narratives were nameless and faceless flat characterisations with little to no description. Their actions took place outside of the frame of social worker's accounts, in dark, indiscernible spaces. However, the off-stage characters exerted power over undocumented migrants which had significant impact on narrative plots. These characters arranged migration journeys, facilitated 'illegal' work and caused destitution (as in Doris' account of the undocumented woman's husband, whose disappearance left his family homeless). In Winston's narrative, and in other accounts, the off-stage characters could be exploitative and abusive, inflicting great harm on the undocumented migrants at the narrative centre. Social workers were unable to access or to disrupt these characters' powerful networks. Migrants' fears of revealing their networks to professionals were an additional barrier to building trusting relationships with social workers. Instead, practitioners were involved in addressing problems that these characters created for undocumented migrants.

The wider literature about undocumented migration, again, reveals gaps in social workers' constructions of the off-stage characters. There is evidence that undocumented migrants are often involved in reciprocal relationships with those who facilitate migration and exploitative employment (Bloch *et al.*, 2015). Moral codes, quite separate from formal definitions of abuse and exploitation, operate within these networks (Hiah and Staring, 2016). Ethnic, cultural, familial and social ties bind

people together in ways that are not well understood by social workers (Bloch and McKay, 2015).

### The helping character and alternative readings

The helping character, social workers, were constructed through their own moral claims about undocumented migrants. We found that social workers' moral formulations about undocumented migrants were complex and that these claims shifted between positions of blame and sympathy. Although undocumented migrants were characterised as lacking power and agency in relation to both off-stage characters and, also, immigration systems, most social workers appeared to have accepted broader discourses that position undocumented migrants as individually responsible for their 'illegal' immigration status. The disjuncture between the attribution of blame and personal sympathy for undocumented migrants created emotional conflict for social workers, illustrated through Debbie's reoccurring refrain, 'I found that very difficult'.

Several studies have found that social workers face ethical dilemmas in their practice with undocumented migrants when their commitment to social work values, such as respect for persons and social justice, conflicts with the exclusionary immigration laws within which they work (Furman *et al.*, 2007; Briskman and Zion, 2014). Our interpretation of Debbie's separation between her professional and personal self, with different moral responsibilities towards her client and her agency, embodies this moral conflict and resonates with the work of Nordling (2017) and Cuadra and Staaf (2014) who also found this tendency amongst the social workers in their studies.

Yet, we are less convinced by the suggestion that the face-to-face encounter between social workers and their clients brings opportunities for structural change (as suggested by Briskman and Zion, 2014) as the personal and the professional self were not given equal weight in the narratives. Rather, the professional self, and the agency mandates, were mostly prioritised. Instead, we suggest that social workers, like Debbie, are aware of their preferred course of action, but feel powerless because of the structures (legal, policy and agency) within which they work. We find the term 'moral distress', borrowed from the nursing literature, a useful way of conceptualising the experience (Weinberg, 2009). Moral distress refers to the emotional and psychological effect of being blocked from pursuing what one believes to be the correct course of action by structural constraints, which may be political and systemic. We suggest that Debbie was experiencing moral distress because of her perceived inability to act to improve the circumstances of the undocumented woman with whom she was working. Debbie was powerless to affect the

decision to deport the woman and her intervention was ending because the woman no longer met eligibility criteria for the service. Yet Debbie's narrative illustrated the emotional dimensions of closing the case without effecting any further change.

### **Limitations**

The modest sample size limits the generation of a representative understanding of social work practice with undocumented migrants. Yet, the in-depth interviews offer rich material which contribute to a more nuanced understanding of practice with undocumented migrants. This study relates specifically to the English context, but, given the global dimensions of undocumented migration and the harms that lack of regular immigration status causes, the findings about the limited intimacy in the social worker–service user relationship and the moral distress experienced by social workers in practice with undocumented migrants may apply in other jurisdictions.

### **Conclusions**

The aim of this article was to examine social workers' relationships with and constructions of undocumented migrants. We have argued that social workers' flat constructions of undocumented migrants suggested that working relationships with undocumented clients were difficult to establish. This is partly explained by the illusive yet important presence of 'off stage' characters in undocumented clients' lives; the relatives, contacts, employers and migration facilitators who controlled many aspects of migrants' lives and discouraged trust with professionals. Social workers were unable to identify or influence these characters, although they recognised their importance. Finally, we have argued that social workers' moral formulations about undocumented migrants are emotionally and ethically complex: practice with undocumented migrants had a deep personal impact on social workers which we have conceptualised as a form of 'moral distress'.

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Original Article: Non-Empirical

## Overcoming ethical barriers to research

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### Abstract

Researchers engaged in studies about 'hidden social groups' are likely to face several ethical challenges. Using a study with undocumented Chinese migrants in the UK, challenges involved in obtaining approval by a university research ethics committee are explored. General guidance about how to resolve potential research ethics issues, with particular reference to 'hidden social groups', prior to submission to a research ethics committee is presented.

### Keywords

research ethics, hidden social groups, qualitative research, undocumented migrants, Chinese migrants

### Introduction

Researchers engaged in examining social issues relating to 'hidden groups' face many ethical challenges. These challenges relate to hidden group vulnerability; difficulties in identifying and accessing 'hidden participants'; and the possibility that research participation may stigmatize or re-traumatize participants. Researchers have addressed such issues head-on, used creative methods to overcome ethical constraints (see, for example, Cornwall and Jewkes' 1995 review of participatory

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methodologies) or, regrettably, occasionally disregarded standard ethical principles (a notorious example is found in the covert methods used by Humphreys, 1975). In this article, we explore the challenges involved in obtaining ethical approval for research with one particular hidden group: undocumented Chinese migrants. First, we provide an overview of the project context, aims and methods. Next, we examine the nature of the issues raised by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC). We argue that these issues are both technical and conceptual in nature and we outline the response taken to each type of issue. Finally, drawing on Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) reflexive approach to research ethics, we analyse how general principles drawn from our experience about common ethical concerns can have relevance for qualitative researchers engaged with studies involving hidden groups.

### **The project**

There is evidence both that the global population of irregular migrants has been increasing (Koser and Laczko, 2010) and also that undocumented status has been associated with significant psychological, social and political difficulties (Bloch et al., 2014). The issues addressed in this article arose from a UK study of 15 Chinese migrants with irregular migration status conducted by the first author and supervised by the second author. The study design comprised participatory interviews (conducted in English and Chinese), adapted from Wang and Burris's (1997) photovoice model, in which participants used a provided digital camera to photograph images that conveyed their experiences of irregular migration status. These visual methods enabled participants to 'construct accounts of their lives in their own terms' (Holloway and Valentine, 2004: 8) and to prompt discussion of participants' memories and feelings that interviews alone may not have evoked (Bagnoli, 2009; Harper, 2002).

### **The ethical issues**

The project was submitted to the UREC, which identified three issues with both technical and conceptual components. These issues related to: the role of the researcher, the identification of participants and the nature of cross-language research.

#### *Role of the researcher*

*Technical concerns.* Committee members suggested that participants may be identified as criminals and queried whether the first author would have a legal duty to report disclosures of criminality. These concerns contained two key misunderstandings:

first, that individuals who violate immigration laws are criminals when, in fact, the majority of immigration offences are civil rather than criminal offences (Aliverti, 2016); second, that researchers have an obligation to report disclosures of criminal offences made during research.<sup>1</sup>

In response, the revised second submission to the UREC clarified the legal obligations of researchers by reference to legislation and established UK ethical frameworks. For example, the authors cited the British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics (2015) that states ‘In general in the UK people who witness crimes or hear about them before or afterwards are not legally obliged to report them to the police. Researchers are under no additional legal obligations’ (11). To add weight to this position, we drew the committee’s attention to previous empirical studies relating to irregular migration where researchers have protected the identities of participants with ‘illegal’ status (see, for example, Bloch et al., (2009) in the UK and Gonzales, (2011) in the US).

*Conceptual concerns.* The committee were concerned about how the first author’s professional identity, as a social worker, might affect the researcher–participant relationship. The UREC questioned whether the first author’s professional responsibilities to assist would become paramount if participants requested support or made disclosures of harm during or after fieldwork. According to Bell and Nutt (2012) based on their examination of practitioner research, differentiating the ‘researcher role’ from the ‘social worker role’ is difficult to achieve during fieldwork when unanticipated ethical dilemmas and emotions are likely to emerge.

In response, we provided the committee with a detailed account of how the first author would respond to safeguarding issues and participant requests for support during and after fieldwork (which involved signposting to health, legal and education support services). In addition, to enhance the first author’s ability to deal reflexively with emerging dilemmas, supervision with more experienced practitioner-researchers would be used to develop situated responses to fieldwork problems.

### *Identification of participants*

*Technical concerns.* The UREC requested a detailed account of how participants’ identities would be protected, given that participation in the study could potentially reveal their migration status. The research design involved participant-produced visual data that would increase the visibility of participants who, out of necessity, actively hide their undocumented status. Therefore, the researchers were asked to clarify how photographs and other visual data would be anonymized and where they would be displayed (and for what purposes).

In response, the researchers drew on three arguments: recommendations of researchers in the field of irregular migration (such as Düvell et al., 2010); methodological debates about visual data (such as Wiles et al., 2008); and established ethical frameworks (such as the Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association Visual Sociology Group, December 2006) to develop a protocol that would protect participants' identities. This protocol comprised several practical arrangements in addition to the standard practice of removing real names, addresses and other identifiable details from data. For example, contrary to the accepted practice of obtaining signed consent forms, we would follow Düvell et al.'s (2011) recommendations by asking participants to indicate consent verbally rather than in writing. We would also arrange safe interview venues where participants would not be identified by others within their communities. Photographs produced by participants would be edited by the first author to remove identifiable people, objects and places and plans for the display of the photographs would be made clear to participants during the negotiation of consent.

*Conceptual concerns.* The committee members queried how the manipulation of participant-produced photographs for anonymization would affect the meaning that participants intended – a key dilemma for visual researchers. Empirical studies about researchers' experiences of using visual methods have suggested that decisions about how to anonymize visual data (or not) are embedded in philosophical argument about researcher paternalism and participant autonomy (Wiles et al., 2012). The scientific validity of visual data that has been significantly edited and amended for anonymization also requires consideration. Although the researchers recognize both philosophical and scientific considerations, the vulnerability of participants due to their undocumented status had to be considered.

This conceptual question about anonymization prompted a significant amendment to the research design. Initially, the researchers planned to request consent for the use of participants' photographs before anonymization. However, to provide participants with the opportunity to comment on their edited photographs, an additional consent process was developed that would take place two–four weeks after the participants' final interview with the first author. Participants would have the opportunity to comment on their anonymized photographs and to consider whether they were satisfied (or not) that: a) their identities were sufficiently protected, and b) the integrity of their creative work had been maintained. Although this amendment to the research design did not resolve the committee's concerns entirely, it increased participant control over the use of data and it served to reassure the UREC that the researchers were taking steps to manage the challenges involved in participant identification.

### *Cross-language research*

*Technical concerns.* The committee members asked the researchers to provide clarity about the interpreter and translators' qualifications, accountability and connection with the participants and their communities. Conducting research with interpreters and translators would complicate assurances given to participants about confidentiality by introducing additional actors into the researcher–participant relationship. If interpreters and translators were from the same community as participants, the risk of participants' identities being revealed would be increased and this could affect the information that participants chose to share. The committee requested that the researchers develop an approach to ensuring that interpreters and translators adhere to the standards of confidentiality required in qualitative research with hidden social groups.

These concerns were addressed by a detailed account in the second submission to the UREC about interpreter and translator recruitment, working contracts and whistle-blowing procedures. An agreement of confidentiality for interpreters and translators was developed. If it transpired that participants and interpreters had a professional or personal relationship, interviews would be rearranged with an unknown interpreter.

*Conceptual concerns.* The committee also asked the researchers to consider how they would prevent important data from being 'lost in translation' given that translation is more than a simple technical process (Bassnett, 2013). According to Temple and Edwards (2002), their experience of conducting cross-language research revealed that language has cultural, political and social meanings, which create social realities that are difficult to translate directly between languages. Furthermore, the use of certain words, phrases or language forms have been found to be important in identity formation (Temple and Edwards, 2002). The interpersonal dynamics of the three-way interview between researcher, participant and interpreter can also, according to Edwards (1998), affect the data produced. Given the focus on examining participants' qualitative experiences of undocumented migration status, the choices made during the processes of face-to-face interpretation and subsequent translation would affect how participants' experiences were understood.

The researchers responded to these concerns in accordance with Edwards' (1998) recommendation to increase the visibility of interpreters and translators in qualitative research. First, Edwards recommended working with interpreters before fieldwork to decide how interviews would be conducted: who would ask the interview questions and how would participants be encouraged to elaborate or clarify certain points. Second, Edwards recommended conceptualizing interpreters as 'a form of

key informant' (1998: 203), which involves understanding the interpreters' views of the research topic, their relationship with the researcher and participants and their thoughts about the interpersonal dynamics of interviews. These requirements would be satisfied by a pre-interview with the interpreter before fieldwork took place to understand their views of undocumented migration. Additionally, discussion between the first author and the interpreter following data collection would focus on linguistic judgements and the translation of culturally sensitive concepts.

These issues were further complicated by the first author's status as an 'outsider' conducting research with participants from a minority ethnic population in the UK. The merits of 'insider' and outsider positions in qualitative research continue to be contested (see, for example, Hockey's (1993: 199) review of the methodological debates on 'going native' and 'going stranger'). Although the first author has acquired Chinese language and cultural knowledge through professional experience of working with Chinese families and two years spent living in mainland China, she would most likely be considered an outsider by participants given her white, British citizenship status and her position as an academic researcher.

To address concerns about the cultural competence embedded in the study design, several revisions were made. First, the researchers explained that the study was designed and developed in consultation with Chinese community workers to ensure that the focus of the project aligned with the needs of the UK Chinese population. Second, during the data analysis process, the researcher would receive supervision from Chinese social-work academics from the same language and cultural group as the participants. The involvement of Chinese community advisors and Chinese social-work academics was designed to challenge the cultural bias of the researchers.

## Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that all 'the day-to-day ethical issues that arise in the doing of research' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 264) cannot be predicted in advance. However, in our experience, the ethical uncertainty implicit in research with hidden groups can be managed within a methodological design that creates opportunities for researchers to discuss issues as they emerge with experienced colleagues and advisors from the same cultural and linguistic group as the participants. We take it as axiomatic that researchers (proposers) who submit a research proposal focussed on hidden groups to an UREC, of whatever type, will want their proposal to be approved ideally on the first submission, but certainly with as few requirements for amendment as possible. Two general guidance notes can be drawn from our experience of overcoming ethical barriers to research:

1. At the outset, and prior to the submission to the UREC, the proposers should attempt to distinguish those aspects of the proposal that are technical in nature from those that are conceptual. Ethical issues that are technical in nature can be satisfied with full and detailed preparation of the case, taking account of potential technical, legal and practical issues (e.g. technical processes involved in the management and anonymization of data, and the arrangements in place to manage working relationships with other actors, such as interpreters or gatekeepers). Proposers should avoid making assumptions about UREC members' knowledge about the legal obligations of the researchers in studies with hidden social groups; rather these obligations should be explained explicitly with reference to relevant legislation, disciplinary codes of ethics and the approaches used by established researchers in the field.
2. Where, prior to submission, conceptual issues can be identified in the proposal (e.g. relational aspects of fieldwork, professional sensitivities of researchers, and processes involved in interpretation and representation of participant views), these may be comparatively more difficult to resolve in advance than the technical issues. One method of addressing these issues, drawing on Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) recommendation, is to adopt a reflexive approach to research ethics. During the development of research ethics proposals for studies with hidden groups, researchers can develop ethically sound and reflexive practices by questioning their own role (and the role of others), the aim of the research and the impact on participants (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) and reflect these in the UREC proposal.

## **Conclusion**

Our experience has demonstrated that overcoming ethical barriers to research with hidden groups, raised by submission to the University UREC, involved responding to both technical and conceptual issues relating to research ethics. We acknowledge that, by definition, our approach to addressing ethics in practice issues is partial, as it is impossible to anticipate all eventualities before beginning fieldwork. However, we have argued that qualitative researchers can overcome barriers to research with hidden groups by developing technical accounts of their studies that include descriptions of the legal duties of researchers, and by developing reflexive approaches to address the ethical issues that are likely to emerge in practice. Finally, we have suggested that research design should create space for dialogue between researchers and the wider communities of the hidden group to address the unanticipated ethical issues that emerge during fieldwork and to challenge researchers' cultural bias.

## **Declaration of conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Notes

- i. There are specific circumstances in which UK law places a duty on citizens, including researchers, to report information pertaining to crimes that are damaging to the public interest. These include;
  1. Information in relation to an act of terrorism (Terrorism Act, 2000).
  2. Information about suspected instances of money laundering (Proceeds of Crime Act, 2002).
  3. Information about the neglect or abuse of a child. There is no legal mandate to report this type of information, but there is an accepted moral obligation which applies to researchers.

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## Appendix B: Literature review tools and examples

Prompts used to inform the critical appraisal of literature (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006)

1	Are the aims and objectives of the research clearly stated?
2	Is the research design clearly specified and appropriate for the aims and objectives of the research?
3	Do the researchers provide a clear account of the process by which their findings were produced?
4	Do the researchers display enough data to support their interpretations and conclusions?
5	Is the method of analysis appropriate and adequately explained?

Critical appraisal of literature examples

Example A

<b>Beck (2007)</b>		
<b>1</b>	<b>Question</b> The aims of the study are stated. However, the explanation lacks clarity.	<b>Score</b> <b>2/3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Question</b> The research design is clearly stated. However, it is difficult to establish if the design is appropriate for the aims and objectives as the latter are explained in a limited way.	<b>Score</b> <b>2/3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Question</b> A limited account of the research process is provided. Missing information includes: detailed description of the key informants who took part in interviews; details of recruitment; context for the author's observations which were recorded in a research diary; detailed information about the media reports	<b>Score</b> <b>2/3</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Question</b> Some data (direct quotes from participants) are presented to support the author's claims. However, several claims are not warranted by evidence.	<b>Score</b> <b>2/3</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Question</b> No explanation of the method of analysis is provided. Missing information includes: the author's approach to analysing interviews, a research diary and media reports.	<b>Score</b> <b>1/3</b>
<b>Other comments</b>	Knowledge claims are generalised to the Fujianese in Liverpool, with some qualifications relating to the concept of "sub-ethnicity".	<b>Total score</b> <b>9/15</b>

Example B

<b>Lawthom et al. (2013)</b>		
<b>1</b>	<b>Question</b> The aims of the study are clearly stated.	<b>Score</b> 3/3
<b>2</b>	<b>Question</b> The research design is clearly stated. The design is appropriate for the aims of the study (narrative interviews were used to theorise the experiences of Chinese migrant workers).	<b>Score</b> 3/3
<b>3</b>	<b>Question</b> A clear account of the research process is provided. Information relating to recruitment and access, participant demographic information and changes made to the research design due to the sensitive nature of the research topic are described.	<b>Score</b> 3/3
<b>4</b>	<b>Question</b> Knowledge claims are warranted with reference to appropriate interview data. In accordance with the narrative approach to data analysis, large sections of participants' interviews are quoted in full alongside biographical summaries of participants.	<b>Score</b> 3/3
<b>5</b>	<b>Question</b> The method of narrative analysis is clearly stated.	<b>Score</b> 3/3
	<b>Other comments</b> The generalisability of knowledge claims is qualified in accordance with the sample size and research design.	<b>Total score</b> 15/15

### Appendix C: Research assistant role

Agreed roles for researcher (Helen) and research assistant (Jo) for interviews conducted in Putonghua

Activity	Who will take the lead?
Welcome participant and thank them for attending	Helen
<p>Give the participant the information sheet and consent form and ask them to read and sign if they are happy with it.</p> <p>Invite participants to ask any questions they may have.</p>	Helen to introduce the consent form. Jo to help respond to participant questions.
Ask interview questions	<p>Helen to ask all questions.</p> <p>Jo to help translate the questions if participants cannot understand Helen or need further clarification.</p> <p>Both Helen and Jo to ask follow-up questions.</p>
Respond to participants' narratives	<p>If Helen can't understand what the participant is narrating, she will look at Jo.</p> <p>When there is a natural pause, Jo will translate a brief summary of the participant's words.</p>

<p>Invite the participants to take part in a creative activity and a second interview to discuss creative work</p>	<p>Jo</p>
<p>Ask participant if they know anyone else who would like to take part in the project</p>	<p>Helen, with Jo's assistance if required</p>
<p>Thank the participant for their time.</p>	<p>Helen</p>

## Interpreter / translator confidentiality agreement



### INTERPRETER/ TRANSLATOR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

**Study Title:** *Undocumented Young People, Illegality and Social Work.*

**Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:** Helen E. Machin, PhD Candidate, School of Social Science and Public Policy, Chancellor's Building, Keele University, ST5 5NH, H.E.Machin@keele.ac.uk. (Telephone Number: TBC).

I, \_\_\_\_\_, interpreter/translator agree to:

1. Treat all the research information shared confidentially by refraining from discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., audio files, transcripts, creative work) with anyone other than Helen Machin.
2. Ensure that I do not reveal the identities of research participants to anyone other than Helen Machin.
3. Ensure that all research information in any form or format (e.g., audio files, transcripts, creative work) is secure while it is in my possession. Electronic data will be stored on an encrypted laptop and other data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at Keele University.
4. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., audio files, transcripts, creative work) to Helen Machin when I have completed the research tasks.
5. Erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to Helen Machin (e.g. information stored on a computer hard drive).

I understand that if I breach this confidentiality agreement by sharing information about participants with anyone other than Helen Machin, details of the breach will be shared with my academic supervisors at Keele University for further discussion.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Print Name)                      (Signature)                      (Date)

*Researcher*

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Print Name)                      (Signature)                      (Date)

If you have any queries about this form or about your role in the project, please do not hesitate to contact Helen Machin.

## Appendix D: Ethical approval

### Confirmation of ethical approval of the study



Ref: ERP2319

16<sup>th</sup> March 2017

Helen Machin  
School of Social Science and Public Policy  
Keele University

Dear Helen,

**Re: Undocumented Young People, Illegality and Social Work**

Thank you for submitting your revised application for review.

I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethics Review Panel.  
The following documents have been reviewed and approved by the panel as follows:

Document(s)	Version Number	Date
Poster Advert	1	05-12-2016
Invitation Letter to young people	1	05-12-2016
Invitation email for social workers	1	05-12-2016
Information Sheet and Consent Form for young people	3	10-03-2017
Information Sheet and Consent Form for social workers	1	05-12-2016
Topic Guide for young people Interview 1	1	05-12-2016
Topic Guide for young people Interview 2	3	10-03-2017
Topic Guide for Social Workers	1	05-12-2016
Guidelines for Creative Work	3	10-03-2017
Interpreter/Translator Confidentiality Agreement	1	05-12-2016
Services for advice and support	1	05-12-2016
Consent Form for Creative Work	2	10-03-2017

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application, **30<sup>th</sup> September 2017**, or there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at [research.governance@keele.ac.uk](mailto:research.governance@keele.ac.uk) stating **ERP2** in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>

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If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on [research.governance@keele.ac.uk](mailto:research.governance@keele.ac.uk) stating **ERP2** in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely

*PP* C H Bonnerman

**Dr Colin Rigby**  
**Chair – Ethical Review Panel**

CC RI Manager  
Supervisor



Ref: ERP1304

20<sup>th</sup> July 2017

Helen E Machin  
School of Social Science and Public Policy  
Keele University

Dear Helen,

**Re: Undocumented Young People, Illegality and Social Work**

Thank you for submitting your second application to amend study, informing us that in response to issues that have arisen during fieldwork, you intend to a) broaden the unit of analysis of the study and b) include 6 key informants interviews. I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethical Review Panel.

The following document have been reviewed and approved by the Panel as follows:-

Document	Version	Date
Information Sheet and Consent Form for Chinese Participants	4	18-07-2017
Information Sheet and Consent Form for Social Workers	2	18-07-2017
Topic Guide for Social Work Managers	1	18-07-2017
Topic Guide for Chinese Key Informants	1	18-07-2017

Just to remind you, if the fieldwork goes beyond the **30<sup>th</sup> September 2017**, or there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at [research.governance@keele.ac.uk](mailto:research.governance@keele.ac.uk) stating **ERP2** in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on [research.governance@keele.ac.uk](mailto:research.governance@keele.ac.uk) stating **ERP2** in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely

*PP*  
*CH Bonnerman*

**Dr Colin Rigby**  
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

CC RI Manager  
Supervisor

Directorate of Engagement & Partnerships  
T: +44(0)1782 734467

**Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK**  
**[www.keele.ac.uk](http://www.keele.ac.uk) +44 (0)1782 732000**



16/03/2018

Dear Helen

**PI: Helen Machin**  
**Title: Undocumented Chinese families and social work**  
**Ref: ERP2319**

Thank you for your request to amend your study.

I am pleased to inform you that your request, received on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2018, has been approved by the Ethical Review Panel.

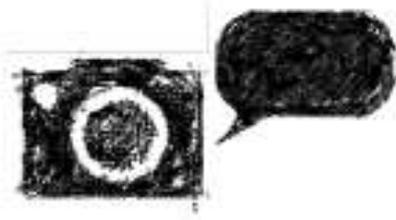
If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated or there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at [research.governance@keele.ac.uk](mailto:research.governance@keele.ac.uk) stating **ERP2319** in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely  
PP.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "V. Ball", written over a horizontal line.

**Dr Valerie Ball**  
**Chair – Ethical Review Panel**



## Information Sheet 信息表

**Project Title:**

项目的名称:

*My Experiences: Chinese People's lives in the UK*  
**我的经验：中国人在英国  
的生活**

**You are invited to take part in a research project.**

**欢迎您参加这个研究项目**

**Here is more information:**

下面是更多的信息

- 1. Who is carrying out the project?**  
谁在执行这个项目？

The person carrying out the research project is Helen Machin. Helen is studying for a Doctorate at Keele University. If there is anything that you do not understand or if you would like more information, please talk to Helen. You can find her telephone number and email at the end of this form.

进行研究项目的人叫海伦。海伦是在英国基尔大学 博士研究生。如果你有任何问题，欢迎您随时发送短信(可以用微信)或发送邮件垂询。具体联系方式请看下方，感谢您的关注与配合，谢谢！

2. What is the project about?

这个项目是什么？

The project is about the experiences of Chinese people in the UK who may have difficulties with their migration status or may have had difficulties in the past with their migration status. The project will also look at social work with Chinese people.

此项目是关于中国人在英国生活的经历。

参与者可能目前面临着移民身份的问题，或者在过去，他们已经度过了移民身份这道难关。这个项目还将关注面向中国人的社会工作。

3. Do I have to take part?

我必须参加吗？



No, you do not have to take part in the project.

不是，您不是必须参加。

If you want to take part, you will be given a consent form to sign. If you sign the consent form, you can still withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. You can also ask for any information that you have shared to be removed from the study until September 2017. If you do withdraw from the study, it will not affect your migration status or any of the services that you receive.

如果您想参加，您将需要签署一份同意书。如果您签署同意书，您仍然可以无理由随时退出。您在调查中分享的信息也可以随时要求被移除。直至 2017 年 9 月。如果您退学，则不会影响您的迁移状态或您受到的任何服务。

Please take your time to decide if you want to take part or not. You might find it helpful to talk to a friend or family member about taking part in the study.

请您仔细斟酌是否参与本项目，与英国的家人和朋友沟通可能会对您做出选择有一定的帮助。

#### 4. What will happen to me if I take part?

##### 如果参加我需要做什么？

You will take part in 2 interviews. Each interview will take about 1 hour. If you would like to speak in Chinese during the interviews, an interpreter can be arranged. 您会参加 2 次采访，每次采访要花 1 小时。如果您想在采访中用中文交流，我们会安排一名翻译。

If you agree, both interviews will be audio recorded and then written into a script for Helen to read. The recording will only be used for research purposes.

在您的许可下，两个采访会被录音，然后记录在海伦的记事簿内，以便查阅。保证您的采访录音仅用于该项研究。

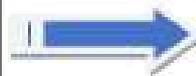
我们可能会和您讨论以下几个问题：

##### Interview 1: 采访 1

You will be asked to talk about your life in the UK. You will also be asked some questions about how your migration status affects your life. You will be asked if you have ever met a social worker. If you have, you will be asked to talk about this experience. You will then be given a digital camera and a journal with pens so that you can take photographs, draw or write about your life in the UK before the second interview.

您可能讨论，包含以下几个问题：  
您在英国的生活。  
您的移民身份如何影响您的生活。  
您是否见过社会工作者。  
如果有的话，请讲述一下经历。  
然后，我们会给您一台数码相机和一个笔记本，利用这些工具您可以拍一些照片，画一些图画或者笔记描述您在英国的生活，为第二场做准备。

2 - 4 weeks later  
2 - 4 周后



##### Interview 2: 采访 2

You will be asked to bring the digital camera back to the interview along with any drawings or writing you have done. You will be asked to talk about your photographs, drawing and writing.

您必须带着您已经完成的画作、笔记和数码相机回到面试现场，需要讲述一下您的照片、画作、和书写文稿。

**5. How will I be repaid for taking the time to take part?**

如果参加，我会得到什么样的回报？

To thank you for taking the time to take part in the project, you will be given a £20 voucher of your choice at the end of the second interview.

为了感谢您的参与，在第二场采访结束时，您将获得一张价值 20 英镑的代金券。

**6. Are there any risks or benefits involved?**

是否有风险或利益？

This project is not connected with the UK government or any other official body. Information about you and your migration status will not be shared with the UK government or Home Office.

重要的是您明白这个项目与英国政府没有联系。有关您和您的移民身份的信息不会与任何政府机构共享。

To protect your identity, your real name will not be recorded at any point in the project. Helen will ask you to choose a pseudonym (a different name) to be used in your interviews. Helen will also use Photoshop to edit your photographs, drawings and writing to make sure that you cannot be identified. However, please only share information, photographs, drawings and writing that you feel comfortable sharing. Helen will talk with you about this.

为了保护您的身份，您的真实姓名将不会被记录在项目的任何位置。海伦会要求您选择在您的采访中使用的化名（不同名称）。海伦还将使用 Photoshop 编辑您的照片、图纸和文字，以确保您无法被识别。但是，请您选择合适的信息，照片，画作和文章，海伦之后会和您讨论这个。

You may become upset or embarrassed during your interviews. You will be able to stop interviews or take breaks at any time.

您在采访中可能会感到不安或尴尬。您可以随时停止采访或休息。

By taking part in the project, you will be helping to tell others what it is like to be a Chinese person in the UK who has difficulties with migration status. Helen will use what she finds out to ask policy makers and social workers to improve things for people who have difficulties with their migration status. You may find that you enjoy talking about your life and being creative. However, there is no guarantee that taking part in the project will improve things for you or affect your migration status in any way.

参加这个项目，您将帮助他人了解一个在英国的中国人是如何面临移民身份的困难。海伦会利用她所发现的问题，让决策者和社会工作者改善对移民身份有困难的人的事情。你可能会发现你喜欢谈论你的生活和创造力。但是，不能保证参与项目会改善您的情况，或以任何方式影响您的迁移状态。

## 7. How will information about me be used?

### 如何使用我的信息？

Helen will write a report at the end of the project which will explain what she found out about the experiences of Chinese people in the UK. This is called a PhD thesis. Helen will also write articles about the project which will be published in journals for academics and professionals to read. Helen will use your photographs, drawings and writing to hold an exhibition at Keele University and at an art gallery in Manchester. Your real name, photographs of you and any other information that may identify you will not appear in the report and articles that Helen writes. You can choose if you would like your quotes and your photographs, drawings and writing to be used in this way.

海伦会在项目结束后写一份报告，这将解释她关于中国人在英国的经历报告，这被称为博士论文。海伦还将撰写关于该项目的文章，将在期刊上发表，供学术界和专业人士阅读。海伦将使用您的照片、图纸和文字在基尔大学和曼彻斯特艺术画廊举办展览。您的真实姓名、您的照片和任何其他可识别您的信息不会出现在海伦写的报告和文章中。您可以选择是否要以这种方式使用您的访谈和照片、图纸和文字。

If you agree, Helen will keep the anonymised written script of your interview and your edited photographs, drawings and writing to use in future research. However, the audio recordings of your interviews will be destroyed when the project ends.

如果您同意，Helen 将保留采访的匿名书写脚本以及您编辑过的照片、图纸和作品，以供将来研究使用，但是，当项目结束时，您的访谈录音将被销毁。

## 8. Who will know about the information I share in the study?

### 谁会知道我在研究中分享的信息？

Only Helen will know your real name. Other information you share during the project will be seen by Helen, an interpreter (if you decide to use one), and Helen's two supervisors. Your information will be kept on a computer with a password that only Helen can access. Photographs or descriptions of working without a permit, driving without a license and using false migration documents will not be handed to the police or to the UK government. However, you need to know that a government agency could request that information from the research project is produced. So far, the UK government has never asked a researcher like Helen to do this, but it is important that you think about this possibility when deciding what information, you are comfortable about sharing. If you share information which suggests that a child is at risk of significant harm, a referral will be made to the relevant local authority's children's services and to the police. This could affect your migration status and your right to remain in the UK.

只有海伦会知道你的真实姓名。您在项目期间分享的其他信息将由海伦、口译员（如果您决定使用一个）和海伦的两名主管看到。您的信息将保存在只有海伦可以访问的加密计算机上，没有许可证的工作照片或描述。驾驶没有执照和

使用虚假的移民文件不会交给警方或英国政府，但是，您要知道政府机构可以要求查看研究项目的信息，到目前为止，英国政府从来没有要求像海伦这样的研究人员这样做，但是在决定你分享什么信息时，你可以考虑一下这个可能性。如果您分享的信息表明儿童有重大损害的危险，将会转交给相关地方当局的儿童服务站和警察局，这可能会影响您的移民身份和您在英国逗留的权利。

#### 9. What if there is a problem?

如果有问题怎么办？

If you have a problem about any part of the project, please speak to Helen who will do her best to answer your questions. If you are unhappy about the project and you want to make a complaint, please write to Nicola Leighton who deals with Keele University's research project complaints. Nicola's address is:-

如果您对项目的任何部分有问题，请与海伦交谈，并将尽力回答您的问题，如果您对项目不满意，并且您想投诉，请写信给负责基尔大学研究项目投诉的 Nicola Leighton，尼古拉的地址是：

Nicola Leighton  
Research Governance Officer  
Directorate of Engagement and Partnerships  
IC2 Building  
Keele University  
ST5 5NH  
E-mail: [n.leighton@keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.leighton@keele.ac.uk)  
Tel: 01782 733306

If you have any questions or comments, please talk to Helen.  
如果您有任何问题或意见，请与海伦沟通和交流。

#### Contact details of Researcher:

博士研究生研究员详细信息：

Helen Machin (海伦)  
School of Social Science and Public Policy  
Keele University  
社会科学和公共政策学院  
英国基尔大学

Contact E-Mail: 电子邮件 [H.E.Machin@Keele.ac.uk](mailto:H.E.Machin@Keele.ac.uk)

Contact Telephone Number: 电话: 07496735441

## CONSENT FORM

### 同意书

**Project Title:**

*My Experiences: Chinese People in the UK*

项目的名称:

# 我的经验：中国人在英国 的生活

**Please tick the box if you agree with the statement.**

如果您同意声明，请勾选框。

1. I have read the information sheet for the project *My Experiences: Chinese People in the UK* and I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

我已经阅读了有关“我的经验：中国人在英国的生活”的项目信息表，我有机会提出问题。

2. I understand that I don't have to take part in the project and I can withdraw at any time.

我明白我不必参加这个项目，随时可以终止。

3. I agree to take part in this project.

我同意参加这个项目。

4. I agree to allow the information I share to be used for future research projects.

我同意分享的信息用于未来的研究项目。

5. I agree to be contacted about the possibility of taking part in future research projects.

我同意接受参与未来研究项目的可能性。

6. I agree for my anonymized quotes to be used in reports, articles and exhibitions in connection with the study.

我同意我的匿名引语用于与研究有关的报告、文章和展览。

---

Participant Pseudonym

参与者匿名

---

Date 日期

---

Mark of Agreement 协议标志

---

Researcher 研究员

---

Date 日期

---

Signature 签名

## Topic guide



### TOPIC GUIDE

**Project Title:** *Picturing My Experiences: Chinese People in the UK*

*Participants will be asked to choose a pseudonym to be used during interviews and in all future uses of the interview data.*

**Introduction:** Thank you for agreeing to take part in the project. The project is about the experiences of Chinese people in the UK who may have difficulties with their migration status. The project will also look at social work with Chinese people. In today's interview, I will ask you to talk about your everyday life, paying attention to how your migration status affects you. I will also ask you some questions about your experience with social workers. Can I remind you that you can stop the interview at any time, take a break, or withdraw from the study. Would you like to ask me any questions about the project or about today's interview? Let's begin by confirming some personal details.

**Demographic Information:**

Age:

Education:

Sex:

Employment:

Length of time in the UK:

Living situation:

**Opening question**

Can you tell me your story of migrating to the UK?

**Semi-Structured Questions**

Family: Can you tell me about your family?

Education/ Work: Can you talk about your experiences of school/ college/ university /work?

Social life: Can you talk about your friends (in the UK and elsewhere)?

Migration status:

1. Are there times when your migration status feels more important? Can you talk about the people or places that make your migration status feel more important?
2. Are there times or places when your migration status feels less important? Can you talk about the people or places that make your migration status feel less important?
3. Have you ever come in to contact with a social worker?

- If so, can you talk about the experience?
- If not, do you know what social workers do? Would you ask for help or support from social workers?

4. Have you ever tried to change or challenge your migration status? Can you talk about this?

Change/ Support: Can you talk about any big changes that have happened in your life? What caused these changes? Can you talk about where /who you go to for help and support?

Is there anything else you would like to add/ talk about?

<p><b>Probes</b></p> <p>Could you tell me more about x?</p> <p>How did x make you feel?</p>
---

**Conclusion:** Thank you for taking part in the project. If you have any questions about any part of the project, you can contact me and I will do my best to answer your questions.