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FLOWERS AS VEHICLES FOR INTEGRATION:
THE URBAN EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANT STREET VENDORS
IN CHINA'S INFORMAL ECONOMY

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Abstract

This study examines how street flower vending facilitates urban integration for internal migrant workers in China by investigating economic, social, and identity dimensions of integration. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve migrant flower vendors, this research reveals how the distinctive characteristics of flower vending create unique pathways for integration. Economically, while flower vending provides sufficient income, it alone does not contribute to meaningful economic integration. Rather, the autonomy, entrepreneurial agency, and self-determination afforded by this occupation constitute more significant factors in vendors' economic incorporation into urban life. Socially, flower vendors develop deep spatial familiarity with urban environments, build diverse social networks with both fellow vendors and local customers, and gain intimate understanding of local cultures and values. From an identity perspective, though vendors experience regulatory challenges from urban management systems, they demonstrate remarkable resilience and develop a sense of meaning through their role in urban environment. The findings suggest that street flower vending, with its aesthetic nature and special positioning in urban spaces, provides migrant workers with opportunities for integration that differ from other forms of street vending or informal employment. This research contributes to understanding how participation in specific niches within the informal economy can shape migrants' broader urban integration experiences and highlights the active agency of migrants in navigating institutional constraints through informal economic activities.

Flowers as Vehicles for Integration: The Urban Experiences of Migrant Street Vendors in China's Informal Economy

Introduction

Street vending represents one of the most enduring and widespread manifestations of informal economic activity worldwide, with historical roots dating back centuries and contemporary presence spanning virtually every urban landscape globally (Bromley, 2000). This ubiquitous phenomenon transcends geographical, cultural, and developmental boundaries, appearing in various forms across both developing and industrialized nations. Street vendors contribute significantly to urban economies through their transactions, enlivening streetscapes while providing essential goods and services to diverse populations. They serve multiple economic functions simultaneously: creating self-employment opportunities, facilitating access to affordable goods, extending distribution networks into underserved areas, and activating public spaces with commercial vitality (Fernando, 2006; Petersen, 2014; Sun, 2022). Despite these contributions, street vendors frequently operate at the contested intersection of economic necessity, regulatory frameworks, and spatial politics, facing challenges ranging from legal precarity and social stigmatization to outright criminalization (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Cross, 1998). This tension between economic function and regulatory exclusion becomes particularly pronounced in rapidly urbanizing contexts where migration intersects with limited formal employment opportunities, transforming street vending into a crucial livelihood strategy and pathway to urban integration for migrants facing institutional barriers to formal sector participation (Bhowmik, 2005; Donovan, 2008).

In China, the scale and pace of internal migration have significantly contributed to the rapid expansion of the informal economy (Huang, 2009; Park & Cai, 2011). Within this context, street

vending has emerged as one of the most common informal employment options for migrant workers (Swider, 2015). Existing scholarship on Chinese street vendors has largely concentrated on urban governance strategies, spatial conflicts, and personal motivations (Flock & Breitung, 2016; Hanser, 2016), leaving significant gaps in understanding how participation in street vending shapes migrants' broader urban integration experiences. This thesis addresses this gap through an innovative focus on a previously under-examined subset of vendors—street flower vendors—whose distinct characteristics offer unique insights into the nuanced processes of migrant integration in Chinese cities.

Street flower vending represents an emerging niche within China's informal economy, with considerable growth in recent years. While there are no official records to capture this growth, a Google search for “street flower vendors” in Chinese (*Baitan Maihua*) reveals that 74% of search results date from 2020 to 2024, underscoring its recent popularity. These search results predominantly consist of prospective vendors seeking advice about street flower vending and current vendors sharing their experiences, indicating that flower vending is increasingly viewed as an attractive livelihood option. The choice to examine street flower vendors provides a theoretically rich intervention into existing scholarship for several reasons. First, flower vending represents a distinctive economic niche that requires higher initial investment, greater knowledge of product care, and more complex supplier relationships compared to other common street vending activities such as food or small commodity sales. Second, the aesthetic nature of flowers potentially positions these vendors differently in urban spaces and social hierarchies, allowing for examination of how product type mediates interactions with urban environments, urban residents, and enforcement force. Third, flower vendors typically operate in commercial and high-end residential areas with significant pedestrian flow, creating spatial integration patterns that may

differ from other types of street vendors who cluster in transit hubs or lower-income neighborhoods (Liu et al., 2015). These distinctive characteristics make street flower vending an ideal case study to explore how participation in specific sectors of the informal economy might facilitate or hinder different dimensions of urban integration.

The concept of urban integration is particularly salient for understanding the experiences of China's migrant workers. While numerous studies have documented the institutional barriers to integration created by the *hukou* system (Deng & Hu, 2007; Gu et al., 2020), fewer have examined how migrants, especially those who participate in informal economy, actively navigate these constraints through specific livelihood strategies (Wang & Fan, 2012). The urban integration of migrants is not merely a personal matter but reflects broader processes of urbanization and citizenship formation in contemporary China (Liang, 2019; Zhou, 2012). By examining how street flower vendors potentially achieve economic stability, negotiate urban spaces, build social networks, and develop identities, this research contributes to theoretical understandings of how informal economic participation intersects with integration processes. This approach responds to calls for more nuanced, agent-centered perspectives on migrant integration that recognize the strategic choices and adaptive capacities of migrants themselves rather than positioning them solely as passive subjects of institutional exclusion (Lin, 2018; Liu et al., 2017).

Background

Migrant Workers and the Informal Economy in China

The special household registration system—the *hukou* system—categorizes Chinese citizens into urban (non-agricultural) and rural (agricultural) residents within particular locations (Afridi et al., 2015; Zhan, 2011). The *hukou* system was first designed to solidify administrative control, both socially and geographically, to support the country's then-planned economy by

enabling city-based citizens to work in urban units and assigning peasants to maintain agricultural production (Hung, 2022; Wu & Treiman, 2009). That is, the de jure and de facto populations of the cities were nearly the same, because almost everyone lived where they were registered and the state limited migration opportunities through housing and employment control. Job opportunities in cities, for instance, were restricted to urban *hukou* residents only. The *hukou* system has relaxed since the economic reform, allowing rural *hukou* residents to explore better economic opportunities in urban settings, though failing to provide social welfare services for rural-urban migrants that might ease such fraught transitions (Wu & Treiman, 2009). Informal migration or non-*hukou* migration (change of residence without a change in *hukou* status) thus became prevalent, and it results in a large “floating population” (Solinger, 1999). The phrase “floating population” is intended to suggest “a ‘temporary’ move to a destination where the person is not supposed, and is legally not entitled, to stay permanently” (Chan, 2013, p. 2).

Migrant laborers are the working population with non-local *hukou* in urban settings (Chan, 2013). The majority of them are unskilled or low-skilled and low-educated workers, and therefore, many of them are employed in the informal economy, which normally does not have requirements for qualifications and *hukou* type (Huang et al., 2022; Wang & Fan, 2012). The informal economy is a defining feature of many cities of the developing countries (Schneider, 2005). It is defined as income-generating activities in a legal or social environment that are not regulated or not sufficiently regulated by the institutions of society, while similar activities are regulated (Castells & Portes, 1989; Xue & Huang, 2015).

Three major theoretical frameworks—the modernization perspective, the neo-Marxist perspective, and the neoliberal perspective—have been commonly applied to understand the informal economy (Biles, 2008; Castells & Portes, 1989; De Soto, 1989; Gindling and Newhouse,

2014; Lewis, 1954; Sassen, 1997). ¹While each theoretical framework offers valuable insights, they often contradict or fail to capture the full complexity of China's informal economy when applied in isolation. In contrast, Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) summarize four interconnected factors that have shaped China's informal economy. First, while the relaxation of migration controls in the 1980s triggered massive rural-urban migration, the *hukou* household registration system simultaneously created a structurally disadvantaged class of migrants systematically excluded from formal employment opportunities and social benefits (Huang, 2009). Second, China's socialist legacy produced distinctive employment patterns within state-owned enterprises, with the subsequent dismantling of these entities during 1990s economic reforms forcing many laid-off workers into informal sectors. Third, economic liberalization and integration into global production networks generated increased demand for services in consumer-oriented urban centers while creating extensive subcontracting systems that facilitated informal employment arrangements. Fourth, the global financial crisis slowed China's economic growth, widening the gap between job seekers and available formal positions. These factors interact within China's specific context of rapid urbanization and export-oriented industrialization to produce what Huang et al. (2020) describe as a "cocktail of multiple socio-economic forces" that requires an integrated theoretical approach to fully understand the persistence and growth of China's informal economy.

The informal economy is often seen to provide crucial economic opportunities for migrants facing barriers to formal employment due to "educational shortcomings, lack of fluency, spatial

¹ The modernization perspective conceptualizes informality as a residual phenomenon that should naturally diminish as nations progress through stages of economic development. This dualistic view characterizes the formal sector as modern and developed while treating the informal economy as traditional, backward, and temporary. The neo-Marxist or structuralist perspective reframes informality as a deliberate component of contemporary capitalism rather than a developmental anomaly. Scholars in this tradition argue that informalization serves as a strategic mechanism for formal enterprises to reduce costs, enhance competitiveness, and weaken labor's bargaining power through subcontracting arrangements. The neoliberal perspective, meanwhile, attributes informality neither to underdevelopment nor capitalist exploitation but to excessive state regulation that creates prohibitive institutional costs, thus incentivizing economic actors to operate outside formal structures.

mismatches and discrimination” (Kloosterman et al., 1998), allowing them to exercise agency through informal strategies like developing skill-sharing (Visser & Guarnizo, 2017). For marginalized populations, the informal economy represents a response to exclusion, a space for economic contribution, a chance for upward mobility, despite precarious conditions (Hayami et al., 2006; Quassoli, 1999; Wilson, 2011).

The floating population has been a key driver of labor market informalization. The informal economy provides crucial employment opportunities for migrants who face discrimination in formal labor markets due to the *hukou* system that creates distinct barriers channeling them into informal work (Wan, 2008; Park & Cai, 2009). On one hand, the informal economy offers greater freedom, autonomy, and sometimes higher income to migrant workers, with self-employed informal workers sometimes earning more than those in formal employment (Wan, 2008; Meng, 2001). On the other hand, informal workers typically lack social protections, with only 37% having pension coverage, 21% unemployment insurance, and 14% health insurance compared to much higher rates for formal workers (Park & Cai, 2009). The persistent, massive population of migrant workers in China’s expanding informal economy remains important because it challenges conventional economic theories about the inevitable progression toward formal employment and middle-class status (Huang, 2009). Understanding this dynamic is crucial for addressing the needs of Chinese internal migrant workers, who continue to face precarity despite their significant contributions to economic growth. By 2010, the informal economy’s output accounted for approximately 22% of GDP and has continued to expand since the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by high unemployment rates in the formal sector and a shift in government policy toward greater support for informal work (Huang et al., 2020; Kaimaier & Zhang, 2021).

Street Vendors and Their Urban Integration

Informal employment can be divided into two main categories: informal waged employment and self-employment (Huang, 2009; Huang et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2022; Meng, 2001). In China, 44.6 million people (about 4.6 percent of the working-age population) were self-employed as of 2010 (Huang et al., 2020). Street vending is one of the most common ways in which the self-employed earn a living in the informal economy (Swider, 2015). It is a worldwide phenomenon that provides immigrants and minorities with alternative channels for wealth and upward social mobility. In China, there were more than 20 million street vendors registered in 2010, and this number could reach 35 million if unregistered vendors were included (Wang, 2020).²

In the contemporary context, street vendors are generally characterized as “dirt, disorder and backwardness” by city authorities or government officials that undermine the image of the modern city (Xue & Huang, 2015). To create an attractive, modern “face” of the city that follows the state’s development vision and to maintain traffic order, sanitation, and the organized use of public space, a variety of new regulations have been implemented. Enforcement has primarily been through *chengguan* (urban management officers), established first in Beijing in 1997 and expanded

² For vendors selling non-food items to be registered, they must obtain a Street Vending Registration Card, which is issued by subdistrict offices or local market regulatory authorities. In addition, they are often required to hold a Health Certificate, typically provided by community hospitals or local Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For those engaged in food-related vending, registration involves a different set of documents. Vendors must acquire either a Small Catering Registration Certificate—available at community service centers designated by local subdistrict offices or municipal governments—or a Business License issued by the local Administration for Industry and Commerce. These requirements reflect an effort to formalize street vending activities and ensure basic public health and safety standards.

Despite having some form of registration, street vendors remain part of the informal economy because their status lacks formal legal recognition and is grounded in unstable, extra-legal arrangements. Such registration is not defined by law but depends on the suspension of existing regulations, allowing authorities to revoke or alter permissions at will (Xue & Huang, 2015). Moreover, these arrangements operate outside formal institutional boundaries and are sustained through informal payments and local discretion, rather than rule-based governance (Jiang & Wang, 2021). As a result, registration in these cases reflects administrative tolerance rather than genuine formalization.

to 308 cities by 2010. *Chengguan* conduct regular patrols, issue fines, confiscate goods, and sometimes use force against vendors (Hanser, 2016; Xue & Huang, 2015). Cities have enacted specific spatial regulations, declaring certain prime urban spaces like commercial centers as “no-go zones” for vendors while relegating permitted vending to peripheral locations (Xue & Huang, 2015). The differential access to vending licenses between migrant vendors and urban residents, stemming from the restrictive economic rights embedded within the *hukou* system, constitutes another significant impediment for migrant workers, alongside penalties for public space occupation and the intensified selective enforcement that occurs during major events or urban “civilization” campaigns aimed at creating aesthetically clean and sanitary cities (Swider, 2015).

Street vendors, as migrant workers without local urban *hukou*, are deprived of most state-provided opportunities and state- or employer-subsidized benefits (Wang & Fan, 2012). In other words, they are excluded from the city’s social welfare system and public services. This includes housing, healthcare, social security, and education for their children (Chan, 2013; Wang & Fan, 2012; Wu & Treiman, 2009). In addition to these institutional exclusions, migrant workers are often discriminated against and stigmatized by local urban residents, facing a sense of rejection (Gu et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2023). When difficulties persist, it is always crucial to understand the migrants’ experiences in the host society, and the concept of integration becomes vital (Alba & Nee, 1997). Therefore, understanding how street vendors navigate their integration into cities is the next critical step.

Existing literature discusses street vendors from two major aspects: the *chengguan* system and the use of public space (Bell & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Flock & Breitung, 2016; Jiang & Wang, 2022; Sun, 2022). Almost no literature speaks to street vendors’ urban integration in a comprehensive and systematic way; instead, they are often treated as a peripheral subgroup within

the broader migrant population. To fill this gap, my research intends to incorporate previous frameworks examining migrant workers' urban integration into the inquiry of that of street vendors.

Integration theories have traditionally been used to understand immigrants' experiences in host societies, particularly in Western contexts where the focus has been on international migration (Alba & Nee, 1997; Gans, 1992; Lambert & Taylor, 1990; Omi, 1993; Park, 1939; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Wang and Fan (2012) recognize that while internal migrants in China do not cross international borders, they face similar institutional, economic, cultural, and social barriers that make their urban integration process challenging. For instance, the *hukou* system restricts migrant workers' formal citizenship rights, while regional cultural and social differences (e.g., lifestyles and accents) mark migrant workers as outsiders. Together, these factors create an "internal border" for migrant workers, despite their movement occurring within the same country. Therefore, navigating this "internal border" is vital for the migrant population. Wang and Fan (2012) identify three common forms of integration—economic, social, and identity—which are appropriate for understanding internal migrants' urban integration in the Chinese context. My research will start with Wang and Fan's framework, joined by two other approaches discussed below.

Economic integration refers to the process by which migrant workers are incorporated into the economic structures of urban areas in China. It encompasses several key dimensions, including income, employment, housing, and economic rights (Lu et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2020). Economic integration is a fundamental element of migrants' inclusion in their new settlement locations and serves as a prerequisite for other forms of integration (Alba & Nee, 1997; Arias, 2001). Wang and Fan (2012) assess migrant workers' economic integration by examining whether migrants achieve an average or above-average economic standing compared to urban residents of similar backgrounds in the host society. Although this measure does not capture all key dimensions of

economic integration—and overlooks the possibility that migrants may remit a significant portion of their earnings back home—it nonetheless provides an important benchmark for evaluating whether migrant workers can earn sufficient income to sustain a comfortable life in urban settings. Furthermore, since street vendors operate within the informal economy, they are already excluded from the formal urban labor market and lack access to employment-based social security benefits. Given that this study investigates whether street flower vending can facilitate migrants' urban integration, other indicators such as housing are less relevant to the research question. Therefore, this study primarily focuses on income as the key indicator of economic integration.

Social integration refers to the degree to which immigrants adopt local customs, behaviors, relationships, and daily practices, and it is commonly measured through levels of adaptation, local social contacts, and language barriers (Wang & Fan, 2012; Vigdor, 2008). Street flower vendors represent an especially compelling group for examining social integration because of their everyday interactions with urban residents in public spaces. Many vendors choose to operate in areas frequented by younger white-collar workers and permanent urban residents—groups that often embody contemporary urban lifestyles and possess greater disposable income, making them more likely to purchase flowers on a regular basis. Through this spatial positioning, street flower vendors are not only exposed to urban social practices in a particularly vivid and accessible way but are also embedded in the rhythms of everyday city life. To better understand these dynamics, this study incorporates the people-place relationship framework employed by Du et al. (2018), which highlights two dimensions relevant to social integration: familiarity (the cognitive processes by which individuals develop knowledge of their surroundings) and attachment (the emotional and behavioral bonds that sustain ongoing engagement with the environment) (Fullilove, 1996). Although this framework has been used to analyze migrants' connections to their residential

neighborhoods (Du et al., 2018), it also provides a useful lens for examining how street vendors' relationships with their operating locations may facilitate social contact, adaptation, and broader processes of integration into urban society.

Identity integration refers to an understanding of oneself in relation to others, and a subjective sense of self-belonging. Questions such as whether you identify as a local resident despite without local *hukou* assignment, whether you feel accepted, whether you see the city as your home, and whether you want to stay serve as key measures of integration. One question I explore is whether, through street flower vending, migrant workers feel accepted by the host city, cultivate an urban identity, and develop a desire to stay. Another is that, since street vendors are more susceptible to exclusion and discrimination in urban settings, how are their subjective feelings shaped not only by their economic standing and social adaptation but also by their lived experiences of various forms of adversity. The resilience approach introduced by Lin (2018) offers an important starting point for this framing. By focusing on how vendors interact with their environment, develop coping strategies, and demonstrate purposefulness and resourcefulness, this study aims to understand how the adversities faced by migrant workers affect their sense of belonging.

Method

Qualitative studies have been extensively used to investigate informal street vending across Africa, Latin America, the United States, and Europe (Recchi, 2021). Qualitative approaches effectively explore street vendors' characteristics and their survival strategies in the face of regulations. Within the Chinese context, utilizing interviews is especially beneficial for uncovering the underlying reasons behind migrant workers' choices and individual nuances. While the *hukou* system is typically considered the primary factor hindering migrant workers' urban integration,

Zhan (2011) used interviews to reveal two other crucial but overlooked areas—employment and social welfare. Additionally, qualitative interview methods have often been employed to capture migrant workers’ subjective feelings toward urban identity (Du et al., 2018; Wang & Fan, 2012). Therefore, I adopted semi-structured interviews to investigate my research question. The interviews were conducted online through video calls on WeChat, a communication tool that is widely used in China. See Appendix for interview questions.

Prior to conducting interviews, I utilized online ethnography, or cyberethnography for participant recruitment. This strategy was chosen due to travel difficulties and the rich content available on the identified social media platform, RedNote. On RedNote, hashtags such as “fresh flower street vending” (*xianhua baitan*) and “selling flowers through street vending” (*baitan maihua*)—where people share and document their experiences and stories of street flower vending—have generated more than 633,000 and 151,000 discussions, respectively. As Hallett and Barber (2014, p. 307) note, “Online spaces no longer rest at the periphery of life, but are central to and have fundamentally transformed the ways people around the world go about their daily business.” Although cyberethnography has primarily been used to study online communities and digital phenomena, it also effectively reflects and connects to offline realities (Keeley-Browne, 2011; Teli et al., 2007; Markham, 2020). Therefore, after reviewing RedNote’s textual and video posts affiliated with hashtag topics relevant to street flower vending from January 2022 to the present, I identified 118 potential participants by visiting individual homepages and selecting those who had consistently posted content related to street flower vending for at least six months, as indicated by their posting histories. Eighteen individuals responded to my invitations, among whom twelve were confirmed to be internal migrant workers eligible for this research. While this

could limit the sample’s representativeness, it might also yield richer and more meaningful content during interviews. Table 1 presents the basic demographic information of the twelve informants.

Table 1: Demography

Pseudonyms	Gender	City of Flower Vending (Province)	City of Origin (Province)	Length of Time as Flower Vendor	Part-Time / Full-Time	Marital Status
Liang	Male	Foshan (Guangdong)	Tieling (Liaoning)	9 Months	Part-Time	Unmarried
Chun	Female	Wuhan (Hubei)	Suizhou (Hubei)	1 Year+	Full-Time	Married
Wang	Female	Nanjing (Jiangsu)	Yancheng (Jiangsu)	2 Years+	Part-Time	Married
Zheng	Male	Chengdu (Sichuan)	Shantou (Guangdong)	4 Years+	Part-Time	Married
Ding	Female	Qingdao (Shandong)	Xiantao (Hubei)	2 Years and 7 Months	Full-time	Unmarried
Jiaojie	Male	Changsha (Hunan)	Zhangjiajie (Hunan)	2 Years +	Part-Time	Unmarried
Kongkong	Female	Chengdu (Sichuan)	Guangan (Sichuan)	1 Year and 7 Months	Full-Time	Unmarried
Hu	Male	Beijing (Beijing)	Changchun (Jilin)	1 Year+	Full-Time	Married
Xiaolu	Female	Chengdu (Sichuan)	Huangshi (Hubei)	7 Months	Full-Time	Married
Meimei	Female	Changsha (Hunan)	Shaoyang (Hunan)	1 Year+	Full-Time	Married
Liu	Male	Xi’an (Shaanxi)	Luoyang (Henan)	8 Months	Part-Time	Married
Sanyue	Female	Beijing (Beijing)	Huaihua (Hunan)	11 Months	Full-Time	Married

Informants engage in street flower vending in either first-tier or new first-tier cities (see Table 2 and Figure 1), aligning with prevailing internal migration patterns in China, where migrants typically relocate to cities offering better wages and employment opportunities (Chan, 2013; Sun, 2019; Zhong et al., 2017). First-tier cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, are China’s most economically developed urban centers, while new first-tier cities are rapidly growing regional hubs with strong economic performance and rising consumer markets. Online ethnography of this research suggests that street flower vending is significantly less visible in second- and third-tier cities, likely due to lower levels of consumer demand and reduced pedestrian flow in commercial areas. This pattern implies that opportunities for informal economic activities like flower vending may be closely tied to the economic vibrancy and urban density characteristic of more developed cities.

Among the twelve informants, ten conduct their vending activities across multiple new first-tier cities, which enhances the comparability and potential generalizability of the findings.

However, only two informants currently operate in first-tier cities, limiting the extent to which the study can capture the diversity of street vending experiences and perceptions in these urban contexts. As a result, this research does not seek to draw conclusions regarding differences in urban integration experiences between first-tier and new first-tier cities, nor does it aim to generalize the broader urban integration experiences of street flower vendors in different first-tier cities. Nevertheless, the narratives of these two informants remain valuable and offer a foundation for future research.

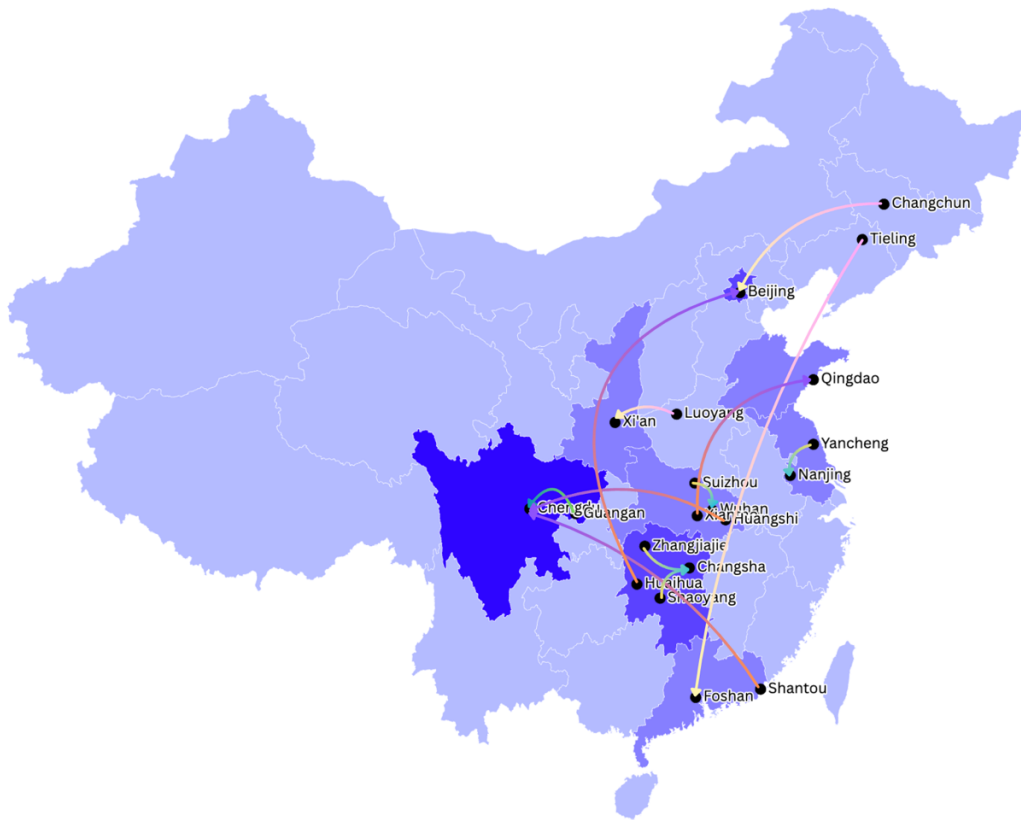


Figure 1: Migration Patterns, with pink-yellow lines representing inter-provincial migration from north to south, red-purple lines representing inter-provincial migration from south to north, and yellow-green lines representing intra-provincial migration

Table 2: City of Flower Vending

Pseudonyms	City of Flower Vending	Region (Northern/Southern)	City Type (Tiered)
Liang	Foshan (Guangdong)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Chun	Wuhan (Hubei)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Wang	Nanjing (Jiangsu)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Zheng	Chengdu (Sichuan)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Ding	Qingdao (Shandong)	Northern	New First-Tier City
Jiaojie	Changsha (Hunan)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Kongkong	Chengdu (Sichuan)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Hu	Beijing (Beijing)	Northern	First-Tier City
Xiaolu	Chengdu (Sichuan)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Meimei	Changsha (Hunan)	Southern	New First-Tier City
Liu	Xi'an (Shaanxi)	Northern	New First-Tier City
Sanyue	Beijing (Beijing)	Northern	First-Tier City

Gender differences are also represented in this sample, although female informants slightly outnumber male informants. This gender distribution is aptly explained by informant Mr. Liu, who stated:

It actually depends more on the type of product being sold. For example, tiramisu, cakes, flowers, and grilled sausages — these products are generally more suited to women, so it's mostly women who sell them. On the other hand, phone screen protectors, grilled naan... and what was the other one... oh yes, marinated dishes — those are usually sold by men, so you'll see more guys doing that.

This sample additionally allows for analysis of how the duration of street flower vending and the nature of the work (part-time versus full-time) differentially affect migrants' urban integration. In sum, the diverse demographic composition of the sample—including gender, the nature of vending activities (part-time versus full-time), varying lengths of vending experience (ranging from seven months to over four years), and different migration routes (inter-provincial versus intra-provincial)—enables an exploration of how individual characteristics and forms of

engagement in street vending may influence urban integration outcomes. To deepen this inquiry, I also employed a comparative analysis by examining differences between informants' current work as street flower vendors and their past occupations or previous street vending experiences in urban settings.³ Table 3 presents their previous and current occupations.

Table 3: Education Level & Occupational History, Including Previous Street Vending Experience

Pseudonyms	Education Level	Current Primary Job	Previous Occupation¹	Previous Street Vending Exp
Liang	University	Data Analyst	N/A	N/A
Chun	University	N/A	Contractor Hotel Florist (Shanghai)/Flower Shop Owner (Shanghai)	N/A
Wang	University	Private Company Employee	N/A	N/A
Zheng	Associate Degree	School Administrator	N/A	N/A
Ding	University	N/A	Private Company Employee	Fruits and Balloons
Jiaojie	University	Digital Media Copywriter	N/A	N/A
Kongkong	Middle School Dropout	N/A	Flower Shop Employee (Anhui)/Cashier	N/A
Hu	University	N/A	Luxury Sales (Tianjin)	Balloons
Xiaolu	University	N/A	Contractor Copywriter (Suzhou)/Freelance Writer	N/A
Meimei	University	N/A	Medical Sales	N/A
Liu	University	High-Speed Train Conductor	N/A	Lemon Tea
Sanyue	University	N/A	Foreign Company Clerk	N/A

¹If not specified, their previous job location is assumed to be the same as their current city of flower vending

²N/A indicates they do not have current primary job/previous occupation/previous street vending experience

³ Longer duration of residence in host cities often affects the urban integration process among migrant workers, either positively or negatively (Li et al., 2022; Mai & Wang, 2022; Wang & Fan, 2012). However, this study focuses specifically on how participation in street flower vending shapes migrant workers' perceptions and behaviors related to urban integration across economic, social, and identity dimensions. Therefore, the length of time they have lived in the host city is not a central analytical focus. Instead, this research prioritizes whether and how the act of street vending generates distinct experiences and perceptions that differ from those in their previous daily lives, and whether these changes contribute to their integration into urban society.

As shown in Table 3, approximately half of the informants are currently holding or have previously held formal employment. However, their status as migrants with non-local *hukou* continues to draw them into the informal sector, at least partially, regardless of their educational attainment or professional experience.

The informants' educational attainment highlights an evolved relationship between education and formal employment access for migrant workers in China. All current formal job holders possess higher education credentials (university or associate degrees), and this pattern extends to those previously employed in higher-end formal sectors. The dramatic increase in higher education enrollment rates—from 3.4% in 1990 to 54.4% in 2020—enabled a broader population, including those who would later become migrant workers, to access higher education, thereby reducing traditional educational barriers to labor market entry (Chen & Hu, 2023; MOE, 2000; MOE, 2021; Wang et al., 2010). However, even with higher education attainment, non-local *hukou* holders sometimes could only secure temporary contractor positions in formal sectors, as evidenced by Mrs. Chun (a contractor hotel florist) and Mrs. Xiaolu (a contractor copywriter), who subsequently transitioned to self-employment (a flower shop owner and a freelance writer, respectively). Meanwhile, Ms. Kongkong, an informant with lower educational credentials (having dropped out of middle school), has only accessed lower-skilled positions in the formal economy—as a flower shop employee and cashier. This finding resonates with the prevailing acknowledgment that migrant workers with low educational attainment remain systematically channeled into low-skilled and low-paid jobs, further reinforcing the structural disadvantages created by the intersection of educational stratification and *hukou*-based discrimination (Li & Li, 2007; Li, 2010).

A closer examination of employment patterns among the more educated informants who held full-time jobs in the formal sector reveals the particular vulnerability of non-local *hukou*

holders to economic downturns. Former professionals such as Ms. Ding (private company employee), Mr. Hu (luxury sales associate), and Mrs. Sanyue (foreign company clerk)—all possessing associate degrees or university education—lost their formal employment during recent economic contractions in China, exemplifying how migrants often constitute a flexible labor buffer that absorbs market shocks. As Bell and Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) suggest, China’s informal economy has been shaped by multiple interconnected factors, including the structural disadvantages imposed by the *hukou* system, making migrants particularly susceptible to displacement during periods of economic uncertainty Mrs. Ding’s reflection—“That year, because of the pandemic, many companies were struggling. In the end, there was no other option, so I had to resign along with some of my migrant colleagues”—illustrates that, despite holding a university degree, educational credentials alone cannot overcome the institutional barriers faced by non-local *hukou* residents.

Those informants who are currently holding formal employment despite their migrant status appear to benefit from specific advantages that mitigate *hukou*-based disadvantages. Mr. Liang has secured formal employment as a data analyst through specialized skills in a high-demand field, representing a strategic adaptation to labor market requirements. Mrs. Wang, Mr. Zheng, and Mr. Liu are married to local residents, which may have contributed to their access to formal employment networks that are typically closed to migrants. Mr. Jiaojie has circumvented *hukou*-based discrimination by staying in the location where he attended university (Changsha).⁴ These strategic navigations of China’s *hukou* system demonstrate how some migrants can access formal employment niches despite the structural disadvantages that typically channel migrants toward

⁴ Local policy initiatives encourage graduates from local universities to remain in the city by offering employment incentives and targeted support such as financial subsidies for employers who hire local graduates, housing assistance, and bonus funding allocated to universities based on graduate retention rates (Changsha Municipal Government General Office, 2022).

informal economic activities. Notably, however, even those with formal jobs have stepped into informal work, not only as a supplementary source of income but also as a means of alleviating emotional stress and escaping the rigid or discouraging environments often associated with their formal occupations.

In sum, for those who have lost or decided to quit their previous formal or informal employment, engagement in street flower vending represents an adaptive economic strategy. For those who currently have primary formal employment, participating simultaneously in street flower vending serve as a convenient supplementary income source compatible with their non-local *hukou* status.

Findings

Economic Integration

Although this research begins with income as a key indicator of economic integration, the findings reveal that economic integration involves broader dimensions beyond monetary measures. For migrant street vendors, it is a multifaceted process that blends structural constraints with personal agency, as they are able to exercise greater control over their working conditions and potentially achieve greater upward mobility (Meng, 2001; Flock & Breitung, 2016).

Income Levels

Income disparity has been the most direct method to examine migrant workers' economic integration (Li, 2010; Wang & Fan, 2012; Yang et al., 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2017). Income levels from flower vending vary across cities, and there are notable differences between full-time and part-time flower vendors. Table 4 presents a comparison of the respective earnings of the street vendors in my sample. Overall, the income of full-time flower vendors tends to be somewhat lower

than that of full-time employees in the local private sector.⁵ However, this gap is relatively modest in cities such as Chengdu and Wuhan, where the difference is within 1,000 yuan. In contrast, in Beijing and Qingdao, the disparity can reach over 2,000 yuan. Remarkably, in Changsha, the income of flower vendors even exceeds the average wage of private sector employees by approximately 1,000 yuan.

Table 4: Monthly Income Comparison and Local Consumption Level

City	Average Monthly Income from Flower Vending (Full-Time)	Average Monthly Income from Flower Vending (Part-Time)	Average Monthly Income of Employed Persons in Urban Private Units ³	Average Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure of Urban Residents ⁴
Beijing	around 6,000	N/A	8,712	3,966
Changsha	around 6,000	around 4,000	5,023	3,757
Chengdu	around 5,500	1,000+	5,653	2,632
Foshan	N/A	around 2,000	6,543	3,611
Nanjing	N/A	around 2,500	6,859	3,879
Qingdao	around 3,500	N/A	5,662	2,886
Wuhan	around 6,500	N/A	7,171	3,198
Xi'an	N/A	around 5,500	5,667	2,285

¹ All monthly income figures are in RMB and represent gross income.

² Figures for average monthly income from flower vending are based on the amounts reported by informants. When "around" or "+" is used, it means the interviewees described their monthly income as "approximately" or "more than a certain amount." When a city has multiple interviewees, I calculate the average of their incomes.

³ Monthly income of employed persons in urban private units is based on 2023 data. Data for Beijing is sourced from the China Statistical Yearbook 2023 published by the National Bureau of Statistics. As data for Changsha is unavailable, provincial-level data from Hunan is used instead, sourced from the Hunan Provincial Bureau of Statistics. Data for Chengdu, Foshan, Nanjing, Qingdao, and Xi'an are obtained from their respective municipal bureaus of statistics. For Wuhan, due to the absence of direct data, the monthly income is estimated based on the ratio between the 2023 average annual wage of on-post employees in all urban units and the average annual wage of employed persons in non-private urban units, sourced from the Wuhan Municipal Bureau of Statistics.

⁴ Sources: 2023 Statistical Communiqués on National Economic and Social Development of each city. For Chengdu, as direct data for 2023 is unavailable, the figures are calculated based on the 2022 and 2023 Statistical Communiqués on National Economic and Social Development of Chengdu.

That said, flower vending entails a substantial degree of income instability. Seasonal fluctuations, post-holiday slumps, and weather conditions all contribute to unpredictability. These

⁵ Comparing the income of full-time flower vendors to that of employees in the local private sector provides an appropriate benchmark for assessing economic integration, as private sector employment represents the most common formal employment option for migrants without urban *hukou*. Unlike state-owned enterprises or government positions that often maintain stricter *hukou* requirements, private sector jobs constitute the primary alternative path of economic participation for migrants in urban labor markets. This comparison also reflects the reality that many migrant flower vendors previously worked in private sector positions before transitioning to street vending, making it a relevant counterfactual for evaluating their current economic standing.

factors inevitably affect vendors' income, and thereby their economic integration. Festival periods dramatically increase both demand and potential earnings, with vendors reporting daily transaction volumes increasing from 15-20 orders on regular days to 100+ during holidays like Valentine's Day or Mother's Day. However, this seasonal rhythm creates both opportunities and challenges, as holidays require increased inventory investment that risks significant losses if unsold. In addition, several vendors reported suspending operations during extreme summer heat to avoid flower wastage, demonstrating how natural constraints further shape their economic participation.

Cost and Pricing

Flower vending also entails significant monetary and labor costs, including the procurement, preparation, and maintenance of flowers (e.g., rehydrating and trimming), as well as the setup and upgrading of vending equipment. Informants estimated their profit margins to range between 30% and 50%. Although these margins are not low in figures, they are reported to be significantly lower than those of other forms of street vending—especially food vending. Coupled with unstable or low-volume sales, this explains the fact that vendors' net income often falls below that of full-time employees in the local private sector and is typically insufficient to meet average consumption levels in their host cities.

A detailed examination of street flower vendors' cost structures reveals the economic complexities they navigate. Product costs constitute their largest expenditure, with perishable flowers representing a significant business risk. Certain premium flowers like peonies have high procurement costs and must be sold quickly before wilting, sometimes forcing sales at break-even prices or even losses to avoid complete waste. Mrs. Chun and Ms. Kongkong explicitly stated that flowers costing 10-yuan wholesale might need to be sold at the same price, or even at a loss, simply to minimize inventory shrinkage. Packaging materials represent another substantial cost center, as

vendors invest in wrapping paper, ribbons, and decorative elements to enhance perceived value—further reducing profit margins. Labor costs, though not monetarily accounted for, are significant as well: all informants reported spending an entire day or night preparing their floral stock in advance. Together, these factors place considerable pressure on overall income levels.

Comparing street vendor pricing with formal flower shops reveals a strategic price positioning that enables their market survival, though at significantly lower revenue levels. Analysis of screenshot data from the Meituan platform across host cities shows that formal flower shops typically charge between ¥68–388 for standard rose bouquets, while premium arrangements range from ¥500–2,900 (see Figure 2–9).⁶ In contrast, street vendors generally price their bouquets between ¥10–30, with special holiday arrangements reaching ¥50–100. This substantial price differential (often 70–80% lower than formal shops) constitutes their primary competitive advantage, enabling them to attract price-sensitive customers while still maintaining sufficient margins to sustain basic livelihoods. However, this pricing strategy, while necessary for market entry, inherently limits their earning potential and keeps their income well below that of formal retailers, even when transaction volumes are high. This income ceiling represents a structural constraint on their economic integration, ensuring that even successful street vendors cannot achieve income parity with the formal flower retail sector. Nevertheless, in cities where the local street vending market is particularly vibrant and popular—such as Changsha (Huang & Liu, 2020; Wang, 2024)—full-time street flower vendors may achieve income parity with, or even surpass the earnings of, formal flower retailers.

⁶ Although they sell flowers for ¥1–19.9, these are either special promotional prices for platform events, limited-time offers for specific holidays, or only available if the customer buys more than 10 stems at once.



Figure 2-4: Local Flower Shops in Beijing, Foshan, Nanjing; Source: Meituan (a Chinese shopping platform for locally found consumer products and retail services including entertainment, dining, delivery, travel, and other services)



Figure 5-7: Local Flower Shops in Chengdu, Changsha, and Qingdao; Source: Meituan



Figure 7-9: Local Flower Shops in Xi'an, and Wuhan; Source: Meituan

In response to their limited capital and storage capabilities, some vendors employ creative sourcing strategies that sometimes involve formal flower shops themselves. Mr. Liang and Mr. Zheng described purchasing pre-bundled bouquets from local flower shops, enabling a high-turnover “same-day procurement, same-day sales” model that eliminated the need for complex processing or storage. But this means they could only serve as middlemen, significantly reducing their profit margins as they essentially resell products from formal retailers with minimal added value. Others rely on local flower markets for frequent, small-batch purchases to minimize spoilage, while more established vendors develop direct relationships with wholesale suppliers from production regions like Yunnan. But given the high transparency of fresh flower prices in urban markets, vendors are unable to set significantly higher prices without losing their competitive edge. As a result, their economic integration remains constrained by market pricing pressures, the need to maintain affordability for their target customers, and the inherent limitations of operating within narrow profit margins. Although their unregistered and mobile status offers certain advantages—such as exemption from fixed stall rental fees, which can reach 3,000 yuan

per month or more—their overall constrained economic positioning ultimately shapes their integration trajectory. This allows for basic livelihood sustainability but rarely permits the kind of financial accumulation necessary for more comprehensive forms of economic integration.

Comparative Livelihoods

When comparing full-time and part-time flower vendors, it is evident that formal employment remains the primary source of financial stability for part-time vendors. However, participation in informal flower vending serves as a vital supplementary strategy. The income earned from street vending is often described as “extra money,” which not only boosts their overall earnings beyond the local average monthly income, but also contributes to their economic integration in the host cities. Several informants referred to this additional income as “pocket money” or “a bit of my own money,” highlighting its accessible and low-pressure nature. As Mr. Liu explained, “[Through flower vending] my income increased significantly. In terms of net profit, it’s basically on par with what I earn from my main job [...] and I don’t have to work so hard at my primary job either.” Although these individuals are employed in the formal sector, their concurrent participation in informal vending not only enhances their total income but also alleviates some of the pressures associated with their primary jobs. Mr. Liu further noted, “While I’m still working, it serves as a way to increase my income. But if I ever quit my job, then it would become my last safety net—my Plan B.” By engaging in part-time street vending, these individuals acquire practical experience in the informal economy, which may serve as a fallback strategy should they ever leave formal employment. Nonetheless, as discussed earlier, full-time engagement in street flower vending alone does not appear sufficient to facilitate meaningful economic integration for most migrant workers. In this regard, access to formal, stable, and adequately paid employment remains a critical factor in achieving long-term economic integration.

When comparing their previous jobs to their current full-time work as flower vendors, informants expressed mixed views. Some believed their current income was lower than before, while others reported earning more now than in their previous occupations. In general, when informants had previously held more stable, skilled, or enterprise-based positions—with relatively high standards for employee performance—the income from those jobs tended to be higher than what they currently earn from flower vending. However, informants also emphasized that their transition away from previous employment was largely involuntary, triggered by economic downturns in the past few years that led to layoffs. As non-local *hukou* holders, they were frequently the first to be let go by companies. In such contexts, street flower vending offered a basic form of re-employment. Others cited the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—such as citywide lockdowns—which forced them to relocate and seek alternative livelihoods. While COVID-19 initially led to a dramatic contraction in China’s informal economy, particularly among offline micro businesses, the subsequent recovery phase saw a notable revival of informal economic activities (Guo et al., 2022). With policy supporting the resurgence of the “stall economy” by introducing more inclusive regulatory frameworks to promote flexible employment and grassroots adaptation, street vending became a popular destination (Kaimaier & Zhang, 2021; Cao et al., 2021). Although their former jobs may have provided more stable income, all noted that flower vending provides them greater autonomy and freedom. As Mr. Hu shared:

You can do whatever you want [when selling flowers]. For example, if I’m in a bad mood today, I can choose not to set up my stall. But if you have an office job, that’s not an option. If I’m in a good mood, I can sell more today, or I can give you a bouquet for free—it’s more freedom of thought. But if you’re working for a company, you can’t do that, because a company has a fixed product line, you have to follow the rules.

This sentiment was not limited to those who had left formal employment; informants who currently hold primary jobs expressed similar feelings. Mrs. Wang described flower vending as “a colorful story,” in contrast to her “dull, single-colored” main job. Mr. Liang remarked, “At work, I have to put on a polished facade to disguise my true self,” while Mr. Liu added, “When you’re running a street stall, it’s relatively free [...] but with an office job, you’re doing pretty much the same thing every day [...] being ordered around by others [...] it feels quite rigid.” These narratives represent a critical dimension of migrant street vendors’ economic integration beyond income: their ability to resist deteriorating employment conditions and reclaim dignity and self-determination often denied by formal sector employment (Snyder, 2004; Vianello & Sacchetto, 2016; Whitson, 2007).

For migrants working in unstable, replaceable, and often low-wage service-sector jobs, self-employment through flower vending can offer the possibility of higher income retention, and similarly, greater economic autonomy. On the one hand, they have left the labor-intensive, low-skilled, and low-paid sectors often described as “dirty, draining, dangerous, and disgraceful” (Lin, 2010). On the other hand, without dependence on an employer, self-employed street vendors can adapt their strategies in real time, respond to local market conditions, and exercise greater control over both their labor and profits (Flock & Breitung, 2016). As Ms. Kongkong reflected, “The salary was also very low [for my previous job] and life became unsustainable [...] but now that I rely on myself, it’s different—you push yourself to keep going and do a bit more [...] I’m earning a thousand more now.” Similarly, Ms. Xiaolu emphasized: “You can decide how much you want to sell, control the costs yourself [...] and manage the money on your own terms.”

Importantly, whether they currently hold primary jobs or work as full-time flower vendors, street vending offers migrant workers an entrepreneurial pathway, enabling them to bypass formal labor market discrimination while accumulating economic capital in urban areas (Chen & Liu,

2019; Liu et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2020). This form of informal employment not only provides higher income compared to other physically demanding jobs but also serves as a steppingstone toward the formal economy. All interviewees expressed their intention to continue working as street flower vendors for at least the coming year, underscoring the relative stability and viability of this occupation. Moreover, many articulated longer-term aspirations that reflect a trajectory of professionalization and upward mobility: Mr. Zheng and Mr. Liang, for instance, aim to further develop their floristry skills; Mr. Jiaojie plans to create a digital mini-program dedicated to fresh flower sales; and others—including Ms. Ding, Mrs. Chun, Mrs. Xiaolu, Ms. Kongkong, and Mr. Liu—hope to eventually open their own flower shops. These ambitions highlight how informal work could serve as a platform for entrepreneurial experimentation and gradual integration into the formal sector. For those who succeed in formalizing their business operations, there exists a greater potential for acquiring urban *hukou* status—a critical mechanism for overcoming institutional barriers to full urban integration (Lin et al., 2020; Fong et al., 2018).

Among the three informants who had prior vending experience, all stated that flower vending provided relatively higher income. Two vendors (Ms. Ding and Mr. Hu) who had previously sold balloon products explained that their decision was influenced by viral internet trends—specifically, a popular frog-shaped balloon that created significant business opportunities at the time. While the profit margins for balloon sales were higher than for flowers, customer traffic was unpredictable, and the product cycle was short, making it unsustainable as a long-term income source. Ms. Ding, who had also sold fruit, reported that the market was saturated and lacked sufficient customer demand. Mr. Liu, who had sold lemon tea, noted that although it was also part of an online trend and had relatively high profits, the physical demands of preparation and

operation were exhausting, preventing her from sustaining the business or planning for its long-term development.

Overall, although income from street flower vending may not be considered substantial—particularly for full-time vendors whose earnings may fall short of the city’s average consumption level—it is generally sufficient to support basic living expenses in the host city. For part-time vendors, the income serves as supplementary earnings, offering a degree of financial flexibility. Many informants also emphasized that they do not place excessive importance on income itself. Instead, they described themselves as having a *foxi* attitude—a localized term in Chinese internet culture referring to those who are content, non-competitive, and inclined to go with the flow. They prioritize the enjoyment of the vending process as long as their basic needs are met. When asked whether flower vending had improved their quality of life in the city, informants often focused less on material gains and more on emotional and personal growth. They expressed that being able to earn some income while also feeling happy and free represents the best of both worlds. This outlook illustrates the complex interplay among economic integration, social integration, and identity integration. Even when financial returns are modest, the autonomy, sense of purpose, and positive emotional experiences derived from flower vending contribute meaningfully to the broader process of integrating into urban life.

Social Integration

Through flower vending, migrant workers develop unique pathways to social integration that differ substantially from the experiences of their counterparts in other occupational categories. This section examines how the distinctive characteristics of street flower vending—including its spatial positioning, interpersonal dynamics, and cultural accessibility—shape migrants’ processes of social adaptation and incorporation into urban community life.

Language Barriers

Previous studies have identified language barriers as a significant obstacle to migrants' social integration (Leong & Tang, 2016; Vigdor, 2008; Yang et al., 2019). Migrants often learn Putonghua (Mandarin) prior to migration or adopt the local accent in order to better adapt to the host society. As the “central” language, Putonghua holds symbolic and practical value. Migrant workers who speak it with non-standard accents are frequently subject to social exclusion and stigmatized as “suspicious” or “untrustworthy” (Dong, 2011).

During the interviews, all of the migrant flower vendors with whom I spoke possess a high level of proficiency in Putonghua—even Ms. Kongkong, who has the lowest formal education level among them (having dropped out of middle school). For these vendors, Putonghua is not perceived as a major obstacle to integration. Instead, concerns around language tend to shift toward the ability to understand and communicate in the local dialects of host cities. In cities such as Foshan, Chengdu, Changsha, Wuhan, and Xi'an, regional dialects are commonly used in daily interactions, and local residents often prefer to communicate in their native dialects. Interacting with local dialect is a common problem for migrant workers in a country like China, where more than 400 dialects are spoken (Wang & Fan, 2012). Consequently, some migrant vendors—especially those from other provinces—initially attempt to learn the local dialect in order to better engage with customers.

Nevertheless, when vendors are unable to fully understand or speak the local dialect and instead respond in Putonghua or in a broken dialect, communication typically proceeds without difficulty. Local residents often accommodate by switching to Putonghua when they recognize that the vendor is struggling with the dialect. The use of Putonghua is thus normalized in everyday exchanges and is not perceived as a barrier to social integration. As Ms. Ding explained,

“Everybody is used to it,” while Mr. Liang observed, “They won’t exclude you just because you can’t speak or understand Cantonese.” Although some vendors continue to make efforts to adapt linguistically, they acknowledge that learning a dialect is a gradual process and, in many cases, choose not to pursue full fluency. This happens even when the migration is intra-provincial, as Ms. Kongkong shared, “I just can’t learn the Chengdu dialect—I speak the way I speak, and that’s simply how Sichuanese sounds. I’m originally from Sichuan anyway. I know there’s a difference between my Sichuanese and the Chengdu dialect, but honestly, I can barely tell them apart.” Therefore, language barriers are not perceived as significant by these migrant flower vendors; rather, they experience social integration when local customers switch to Putonghua to communicate with them.

Familiarity with and Attachment to Urban Spaces

Both living and working environments profoundly shape migrant workers’ social integration experiences (Chung, 2010; Li & Li, 2007; Pun and Chan, 2013; Swider, 2014). Given that this study focuses on the social integration of migrant flower vendors, particular attention is paid to their working environments—vending locations. The framework introduced by Du et al. (2018) can be effectively applied to this scenario by examining how fixed vending locations function as crucial sites for developing spatial familiarity and forming attachments that potentially shape integration trajectories in ways distinct from those observed under the dormitory labor regime.

Establishing familiarity with urban spaces is essential for the integration of migrant workers. As Du et al. (2018) demonstrate, familiarity serves as the foundation for developing emotional attachment to place. It functions as a source of ease and comfort that enables migrants to navigate new environments with confidence. In the absence of such cognitive knowledge of

their surroundings, migrants often experience disorientation, confusion, and heightened vulnerability. There are two major paths through which street flower vendors establish familiarity: the first is through exploring the host city, and the second is by understanding their vending locations.

Exploration. Among the interviewees, all adopted the strategy of setting up “wild stalls” (unregistered, mobile vending stall; *yetan*). This flexible form of vending allowed them to explore different corners of the city during the initial phase and gain a deep, firsthand understanding of the advantages of various locations. Prior to settling on a specific site for flower vending, they often conducted exploratory visits to different urban areas, observing the presence of other vendors and gathering information about local street vending regulations. This type of exploration served a pedagogical purpose, enabling them to develop a systematic understanding of the city.

Typically, these vendors focus their attention on areas with high pedestrian traffic, such as subway entrances, commercial complexes, university towns, and residential neighborhoods. They actively assess and compare the advantages of different locations in order to improve their sales strategies. For instance, Mrs. Chun shared:

I initially set my stall up near the subway entrance, although there was already someone selling flowers there. One evening, as I was packing up and passing by a shopping mall, someone called me over and asked to buy flowers. I realized there might be higher demand here than at the subway, so I decided to settle down and sell in this area instead.

In addition to demand, the feasibility of setting up a stall in a particular area is also a key consideration. Mrs. Meimei explained:

I've explored different places. There's a very popular night market near Wanjiali Square and another one called Yangfan Night Market. But these places are more structured and

regulated. Other vendors have been stationed there for a long time, so it's quite difficult to enter these markets.

Many vendors become well-acquainted with urban zoning and management systems. For example, Mr. Hu noted:

In city centers (of Beijing), street vending is generally prohibited. If there are any stalls, they tend to belong to storefront businesses, where owners might be allowed to set up a display outside. For mobile vendors like us, places like Sanlitun are especially strict and heavily regulated.

In contrast to other migrant workers who tend to live a “point-to-point” lifestyle (commuting directly between home and work) (Chung, 2010; Fan & Wang, 2008; Zheng et al., 2009), migrant flower vendors engage in active exploration due to the nature of their occupation. Their work compels them to familiarize themselves with, learn about, and analyze various urban spaces.

After the initial exploration, street flower vendors further leverage the unique nature of their work by having more direct and extensive exploration with the urban environment, while most migrant workers are not familiar with the “outside” — urban areas beyond the village-in-the-city (*chengzhongcun*) (Wang & Fan, 2012; Yang et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2009). This allows them to follow dynamic patterns of movement and to construct a more intimate knowledge of the host society. Mrs. Xiaolu describes her day of street vending as:

At first, I went to a place two subway stops away from my home, an area with a relatively dense crowd and a larger commercial zone. I would sell there for a while, often around noon. Then I'd move further ahead to a spot near a university, set up there for the afternoon, and eventually make my way to a famous tourist attraction in Chengdu—Kuanzhai Alley—to continue vending.

This narrative resonates perfectly with Mrs. Wang, who concludes, “Through this work of selling flowers, I’ve been able to walk around more parts of Nanjing and explore the city in greater depth.”



Figure 13: Mrs. Wang at her flower stall



Figure 14: Ms. Xiaolu's bicycle flower stall

Understanding the Vending Location. Through street flower vending, migrant workers develop a high degree of familiarity with the specific locations where they sell their goods. They expressed strong familiarity with their current vending locations, demonstrating clear knowledge of their geographic position, surrounding environment, and strategic advantages. They were acutely aware of the role that their vending sites play within the wider urban landscape—categorizing areas as “old towns,” “high-end residential neighborhoods,” “suburban districts,” “commercial centers,” or “tourist attractions.” This reflects their spatial literacy and comprehension of the overall urban layout. For instance, Mr. Hu could clearly articulate which district his “old town” vending location belonged to, how it differed from districts like Chaoyang and Dongcheng, which subway line it was near, and its approximate distance from Tiananmen Square. Mr. Liu was able to describe why the subway station near his stall was considered a “transportation hub,” the number of major shopping centers nearby, and the distinctions between the northern and southern regions of Xi’an. Their detailed familiarity with the characteristics of their vending sites directly reflects their intimate knowledge of the urban environment. For many migrant workers, however, developing a deep familiarity with their urban surroundings remains a

challenge, even after residing in host cities for extended periods (Du et al., 2018; Wang & Fan, 2012; Yang et al., 2020). In contrast, the flower vendors demonstrate a level of urban knowledge comparable to that of local residents, confidently describing city layouts, zoning patterns, and the characteristics and distinctions between various districts.

By establishing familiarity with urban spaces through flower stalls, all street flower vendors developed a strong preference for their current vending locations. This preference can be interpreted as a form of place attachment, as Ms. Ding remarked, “Besides these places (where I currently sell flowers), there aren’t any better options.” According to Du et al. (2018), attachment to place serves as a crucial psychological resource for migrant workers, offering a sense of security, satisfaction, and emotional resilience amid the uncertainties of migration. Place attachment goes beyond mere familiarity; it entails a deeper emotional investment, allowing migrants to experience a sense of belonging despite their marginal legal and social status. At the very least, these flower vendors have developed attachment to specific sites within the host city. Given that these locations—often situated near residential communities, subway entrances, or commercial centers—are central to the city’s spatial structure, they also reflect a tacit recognition and acceptance of the city itself, thereby positively contributing to their process of urban integration.

Host Cities’ Culture and Modern Values

Street flower vendors’ reflections are always grounded in a recognition of the city’s unique characteristics and cultural richness. Through street vending, they come into contact with more down-to-earth aspects of the city and engage with people from a wide range of social strata. Many spoke of developing a more intimate understanding of local residents through their work. For instance, Mr. Liang emphasized that selling flowers helped him let go of preconceived biases about locals—shaped by previous work experiences—and instead connect more deeply with everyday

citizens. Mrs. Meimei observed the local cultural phenomenon of “*daliu*” in Changsha (a local slang term that refers to aimlessly wandering around, often with mildly negative connotations but widely accepted in the city). Mrs. Chun, who initially believed Wuhan residents lacked an appreciation for the aesthetics of flowers, came to realize they possessed a romantic sensibility. Mrs. Wang described people in Nanjing as warm and kind. In Chengdu, Mr. Zheng observed generosity of his customers and Ms. Kongkong spoke of the city’s fashion-forwardness and strong sense of personal boundaries, while Ms. Xiaolu remarked on the fast-paced lifestyle, which contradicted her earlier expectations of a more leisurely and laid-back urban rhythm.

Street flower vendors interact not only with the younger generation but also with customers from various age groups, each leaving distinct cultural impressions. Young people were often described as energetic and cheerful, while middle-aged customers were viewed as warm and respectful. Across the board, vendors frequently used the term ‘adorable’ (*ke’ai*) to describe their clientele. Even Mr. Hu—who characterized Beijing as “indifferent”—shared that he was often moved by small, everyday conversations with customers, such as casual chats about family. The flower stall, therefore, serves as a crucial and positive communicative platform between migrant workers and urban residents. On one hand, it provides migrants with opportunities to interact with diverse urban populations; on the other hand, the friendliness and respect shown by customers act as important enablers of social integration. Over time, many also develop long-term relationships with repeat customers, thereby building local social capital—a topic that will be discussed in greater detail in the following section in relation to its role in social integration.

Due to the symbolic nature of flowers, these informants also develop unique insights into how intimacy is expressed in urban settings—an aspect of urban life that is rarely accessible to most migrant workers. Migrant flower vendors interpret local cultures and values related to

intimate relationships through interactions with three key groups: young couples, middle-aged couples, and minority communities. First, in interactions with young couples, vendors often observe boys selecting bouquets for their girlfriends or couples purchasing flowers together. These moments prompt vendors to reflect on youthfulness and romantic freedom. Mrs. Meimei, for example, noted that girls buying flowers for their male partners—an act she associated with the phenomenon of “women pursuing men”—reflected a shift in traditional gender norms. In Chinese cultural contexts, women are often expected to be reserved and restrained—expectations shaped by long-standing patriarchal Confucian norms that have persisted into modern society (Ji, 2015). The prevalence of such behaviors suggests a degree of cultural openness in these cities and illustrates the vendors’ recognition and appreciation of evolving social values.

Second, vendors witness gestures of affection among middle-aged couples—such as husbands buying flowers after work or wives directing husbands over the phone on what to buy. Mr. Liang reflected that such gestures would be rare in his rural hometown. While it is true that such encounters may reflect a form of survivorship bias—since only couples with relatively stable and healthy relationships, and with discretionary resources are likely to buy flowers—the fact remains that these encounters showcase the more heartwarming aspects of urban culture. These interactions contribute to vendors’ emotional familiarity with their host cities.

Third, encounters with sexual minorities also play a significant role in reshaping vendors’ cultural understanding. LGBTQ+ communities remain a non-mainstream presence in China, facing various social and institutional barriers (Chia, 2019; Wang et al., 2019; Wei & Liu, 2019). However, flower vending has exposed migrant vendors to these marginalized identities and values. Mr. Liang recounted a touching moment involving a same-sex male couple who, while passing by his stall, spontaneously exchanged flowers. One of the young men bought a bouquet for his partner,

who initially blushed and refused, but eventually accepted it with a smile. Mr. Liang was deeply moved by their openness and self-confidence, remarking on the importance of being true to oneself. Similarly, Mr. Zheng and Mrs. Xiaolu observed same-sex female couples among their regular customers in Chengdu and described their relationships as “beautiful.” These observations reflect the fact that local culture is not limited to language, tradition, or historical practice—it also includes modern values. When migrant workers are exposed to, learn from, and understand these modern values, they naturally become more culturally integrated into the host society.

Through these interactions at their stalls, migrant flower vendors pay close attention to both the city and its people—something that is often out of reach for other migrant workers. Exposure to local culture motivates these vendors to adjust their own behavior in order to better adapt to urban life. Some report becoming more romantic, happier, or more positive. Others describe learning to manage their temperaments to better communicate with customers, based on a deeper understanding of urban consumers’ personalities. In short, through everyday interactions, they encounter new customs, practices, and values, which gradually reshape their own attitudes. The flower stall, in this sense, becomes a site where emotional bonds with the city are formed and strengthened, facilitating migrant flower vendor’s social integration.

Social Capital

Social capital plays a critical role in shaping the integration experiences of migrant workers in China. The development and utilization of social networks are essential for accessing a variety of information necessary for migrants’ livelihoods in the urban setting (Fong et al., 2018). These networks not only provide practical support but also contribute to psychological and cultural adaptation, enabling migrants to engage civically within urban environments and thereby form urban identities (Sun et al., 2022; Chen, 2011). The ability to sustain and activate social ties in

urban contexts enables migrants to navigate socioeconomic spaces and maximize available resources (Yang, 2015).

Social capital among migrant flower vendors can be understood through two primary forms: the social networks built among street vendors and those developed with local customers. The first step toward integration into the host city often involves integration into the local street vending economy. Around each flower stall, there are typically between five and ten other types of street vendors, with variations depending on the city. The initial challenge in sharing vending spaces with others is competition. The “first come, first served” rule often discriminates against newcomers and latecomers in the vending space (Jiang & Wang, 2021). However, informants consistently reported that there is little conflict over space and that the vending environment is generally harmonious. For instance, Ms. Chun noted, “Since we’re all in public spaces, there’s no sense of territoriality. Over time, we’ve built mutual respect because we’re all doing business, and we see each other every day.” Mr. Liu echoed this sentiment, “Once you start vending here, you realize that no one’s saying, ‘this spot is mine and that one is yours—no one else is allowed here.’ We actually tend to approach others with goodwill.” They attributed this peaceful coexistence partly to the compact size of flower stalls—often small carts or tricycles—which do not occupy much space and are easy to squeeze in. In addition, the growing number of street vendors at vending spaces is recognized to be a major problem causing competition (E, 2017; Winter, 2017). Informants mentioned that flower vendors usually avoid areas where others are already selling similar products, either relocating or spacing out their stalls accordingly, to adapt to this competition. Overall, the challenge of competition does not appear to significantly affect street flower vendors, nor does it hinder their ability to build relationships with fellow vendors.

The relationships between vendors were always described as warm and mutually supportive. Examples include exchanging goods, looking after each other's stalls, helping with transactions, and cooperating when facing *chengguan*. These interactions not only enabled migrant flower vendors to sustain their livelihoods, but also created positive, emotionally enriching experiences within the urban environment. Fellow vendors included both men and women, ranging in age from university students to individuals in their 40s and 50s, and coming from both local and non-local backgrounds. While some interviewees noted that many out-of-town vendors had already settled in the city and owned property, others observed regional differences. For instance, Mr. Hu noted that in a first-tier city like Beijing, few locals engage in vending, possibly because it is perceived as "low-status." In contrast, Mrs. Sanyue observed many local vendors in Beijing, highlighting intra-city diversity. The everyday interactions among a diverse group of fellow vendors—including both migrant workers and local residents—facilitate the development of social ties through conversations about business, local market trends, and daily life, which not only enhance migrants' understanding of the urban environment but also foster a sense of social familiarity and belonging that is integral to their broader process of social integration.

From this "micro-society" of street vending, informants identified a positive outlook on life, a pursuit of freedom, and a diversity of dreams and aspirations, despite their economic status. This form of social connection with fellow vendors from similar economic and social backgrounds can support their process of social integration by facilitating mutual assistance and information exchange in unfamiliar urban environments (Jiang & Luan, 2021). Moreover, street vending provides migrant flower vendors opportunities to build connections with local businesses. As Mrs. Sanyue pointed out, street vending not only represents a gateway into the local informal economy, but also a pathway to be connected to formal sectors. Mr. Hu shared that he had formed

partnerships with local bakeries and restaurants, enabling reciprocal referrals and even friendships. These experiences suggest that the street vending community serves as a key site of social network building for migrant flower vendors, fostering both emotional support and economic collaboration. The ability to develop respectful, cooperative relationships with other vendors and local business owners strengthens their sense of belonging and facilitates deeper integration into the urban social fabric.

Compared to the connections with fellow migrant vendors, relationship-building with local residents often have a greater impact on migrant workers' social integration. Interactions with local residents create opportunities for practical assistance and emotional support. It also constitutes a crucial pathway for migrants to learn urban norms, behaviors, and lifestyles, helping them gradually assimilate into the social fabric of the city (Chen & Liu, 2019; Huang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2020). As argued by Wang and Fan (2012), social integration serves as a multidimensional process, and migrants who cultivate social ties with local urbanites are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and achieve deeper urban integration. Customers represent this form of social capital for migrant flower vendors. Informants reported typically interacting with 30 to 80 customers during each vending session. Sometimes, vendors initiate conversations to introduce their products; at other times, customers approach them to chat. As Mrs. Xiaolu described, "They'll just pull you into a conversation." Both Mr. Zheng and Mrs. Xiaolu shared their personal trajectories—from being initially nervous and hesitant to speak with customers to eventually becoming confident and adept at engaging in casual conversation. The topics of these interactions frequently extend far beyond flowers or plant care. Vendors and customers often discuss matters related to family, work, romantic relationships, and parenting. Mr. Liu noted, "For my primary job, I worked in a large office. You might only chat with the person next to you—sometimes not even

with them. During work, you are coworkers, but after work, you basically don't interact at all." In contrast, he found that conversations at his flower stall were much more open and meaningful: "When you're actually present in this environment and communicate directly with all kinds of people, you can learn things that you normally wouldn't have access to." For example, through his chats with customers, he came to understand economic and educational disparities between the northern and southern parts of Xi'an, and even used these conversations to start planning his child's education.

These vendors are also intentional about displaying sincerity in their interactions, aiming to build trust and loyalty among their customer bases. On a small scale, this means handling after-sales concerns with care or standing while vending rather than sitting and playing with their phones. On a larger scale, it involves cultivating long-term connections through social media platforms and creating a community of loyal customers. Most vendors reported that returning customers account for 60%–70% of their clientele, as reflected in their transaction records on platforms such as WeChat Pay and Alipay. Many vendors also shared forming friendships with repeat customers—adding them on WeChat, exchanging likes on social media, and staying in touch beyond the point of sale. For instance, customers inquire about the vendors' schedules and locations when they are not present or drop by simply to say hello. Mrs. Meimei shared that customers had invited her into their homes, while Ms. Kongkong recounted experiences where customers visited her home, invited her to social outings, and brought her small gifts or food. The vending location provide these migrant flower vendors with the opportunities to connect with and build intimate relationships with local residents, as Ms. Sanyue reflected:

There's a resident from a nearby neighborhood who simply cannot go a day without flowers. Whenever I'm out selling, she stops by to buy something. The trust is strong. She

gives me a budget, and I put together a bouquet for her each time—she’s always satisfied.

If I weren’t selling flowers, I probably would have never met her.

These relationships are often described by vendors using terms such as “happy” and “fulfilling,” suggesting a strong sense of emotional reward from their customer interactions. Of course, not all informants formed such bonds. Some viewed flower selling strictly as a transactional relationship, not conducive to friendship. Others felt that their high level of mobility discouraged the cultivation of a loyal customer base. Nevertheless, even those who held such views acknowledged that engaging with everyday customers deepened their understanding of the city and positively contributed to their urban integration.

Identity Integration

Identity integration represents the subjective dimensions of migrants’ urban adaptation process, reflecting their sense of belonging and identification with host cities despite structural barriers. This section examines how street flower vending facilitates identity integration through inclusiveness experiences, resilience in facing adversity, and the creation of meaningful identities within urban communities.

Inclusiveness and Acceptance

For migrant workers to transition from temporary settlers to fully integrated urban citizens, inclusiveness must be addressed not only through institutional support and economic opportunity, but also through community acceptance (Sun et al., 2022). Every informant referred to the concept of “inclusiveness,” either directly or indirectly. Inclusiveness represents the fundamental ground upon which migrant street flower vendors establish their businesses and begin their integration into host cities. It manifests as an initial yet critical value that migrant workers encounter before being exposed to other social values and practices—namely, whether they are accepted by the local

community. For migrant flower vendors, inclusiveness can be understood along two dimensions: first, the broader societal inclusiveness toward internal migrant workers as social actors embedded within the host society; and second, the extent to which street vending activities are socially accepted and normalized in the everyday lives of urban residents.

Inclusiveness toward Internal Migrant Workers. Inclusiveness has primarily been assessed through the lens of institutional barriers, government policies, and labor market discrimination (Huang & Tao, 2015; Yang, 2015; Zhan, 2011). It is likely that prior to engaging in street flower vending, many of these migrant workers experienced exclusion in both of these domains. However, once they transitioned into street vending, such forms of exclusion were often circumvented. First, engaging in street vending does not require an urban *hukou*, and second, as self-employed individuals operating outside the formal labor market, they are not subject to formal employment gatekeeping mechanisms. As a result, the notion of inclusiveness becomes more discernible through the attitudes of local residents and the receptiveness of host cities. In general, a welcoming atmosphere is widely acknowledged among informants. Minimal exclusion is perceived, and migrant flower vendors' assumption of a welcoming environment is one reason they chose to come to their current host cities. As Mr. Liang noted:

Because in my view, Guangdong is a very inclusive city. People there won't discriminate against you just because you're from another place. But if you take the same situation to Beijing or Shanghai, they will marginalize you and look down on you because of your migration status [...] That's why I chose Guangdong instead of Beijing or Shanghai.

Thereby, inclusiveness is reflected in the general attitude of urban residents. Approachable, friendly, warm, and respectful are common descriptors used by them to characterize city dwellers.

As Ms. Ding specifically noted, “No matter what social class or background people come from, everyone is genuinely nice and interesting in their own way.”

Inclusiveness towards Street Vending. In the case of street vendors in particular, the host cities’ openness, diversity, and economic and social development are generally viewed as key reasons for the greater acceptance of street vending. These cities are believed—and later perceived—to be more inclusive toward self-employment, including informal street vending. The prevalence of street vending is widely acknowledged in each host city. After engaging in street flower vending, many vendors come into contact with an increasing number of self-employed freelancers and fellow street vendors. As Ms. Kongkong noted:

Here [in Chengdu], there’s a greater sense of inclusiveness and openness. The city is bigger, there are more young people [...] It’s more accepting of different kinds of things [...] I’ve met more and more people working in flexible or freelance jobs. Some of them even share an apartment with me—one I met through selling jewelry, and another through flower selling. They all have their own ideas and ways of thinking.

Street vending is not regarded as a “shameful” occupation, as reflected by Mr. Liang, and people from all places in China can come to these host cities, set up their stalls, and establish a local street vending economy.

Among various forms of street vending, flower vending tends to receive a higher degree of inclusiveness from both urban residents and local authorities. According to the informants, urban residents often view flowers as a source of joy and emotional uplift. Many residents, even if they do not make a purchase, pause to appreciate the flowers on display. Customers are frequently described by vendors using words such as “kind-hearted” (*shanliang*), “positive and motivated” (*jiji xiangshang*), “adorable” (*ke’ai*), “cheerful” (*yangguang*), and “romantic” (*langman de*). This

inclusiveness, reflected in local residents' attitudes and interactions, not only facilitates migrant flower vendors' everyday livelihoods but also contributes to the broader process of identity integration, as they feel a sense of acceptance from the local community. With regard to local authorities, informants attribute their relative leniency and acceptance to two key factors: the compact size of flower stalls and the nature of the goods sold. Flower stalls are generally not perceived as intrusive due to their small physical footprint. Moreover, because they do not involve open flames (*minghuo*) or generate cooking fumes (*youyan*), they are not considered hazardous or polluting. The aesthetic appeal of flowers is also seen as enhancing, rather than detracting from, the urban environment. Consequently, local enforcement—typically carried out by *chengguan*—tends to regulate flower vendors more leniently or even minimally. Nevertheless, *chengguan* enforcement remains a persistent challenge to migrant street vendors' broader process of urban integration, a topic that will be explored further in the section on adversity and resilience.

A Different Voice. Interestingly, when describing the inclusiveness and acceptance of their current host cities, migrant flower vendors often draw comparisons with first-tier metropolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, just as Mr. Liang did. On the one hand, many spoke of an assumed indifference toward migrant workers in these cities, despite not having lived there themselves. Mr. Hu, as one of two currently living in Beijing, provided a first-hand account and is the only interviewee who recognized a lack of inclusiveness in the host city. Mr. Hu shared:

Beijing locals tend to be rather exclusionary; they are generally not welcoming toward outsiders. But even migrant workers living in Beijing can develop similar exclusionary habits—where those at the bottom end up oppressing others who are even more marginalized. This, I have to say, is a very problematic tendency. These days, most young people choose not to settle in Beijing, and there are reasons for that—mainly because the

city is not well-suited for outsiders. Beijing is, how should I put it, a city where social hierarchies are tightly compressed. You can never really see the lives of people in the higher strata—everything is segmented and streamlined. [...] It's a city that lacks human warmth. The longer I live in Beijing, the more I feel that it's not a suitable place for outsiders to start a business. Even though there are many migrants here, it doesn't have an inclusive social system.

Although Mrs. Sanyue, the other interviewee who currently lives in Beijing, still believes that Beijing could be considered inclusive as it provides many opportunities to migrant workers, she fails to analyze Beijing's inclusiveness from other perspectives. Moreover, having opportunities does not mean that migrant workers can access and fully utilize them.

On the other hand, street vending in new first-tier cities is perceived better than in metropolitan cities. As stated by Mrs. Chun, who have previously lived in Shanghai:

Although Wuhan's economy and consumption levels may not match those of Shanghai or Beijing, it's relatively more inclusive [...] unlike in Beijing or Shanghai, where no matter who you are, they just won't allow you to set up a street stall.

This is also reflected by Mr. Hu, who notes the difficulties of street flower vending in the inner circle of Beijing. But Mr. Hu also acknowledges that, having lived in Tianjin—where street vending is strictly prohibited—Beijing has more inclusive policies toward street vending in several outlying districts.

In sum, although the general level of inclusiveness appears to be lower in first-tier cities compared to new first-tier cities among informants, this research cannot draw definitive conclusions about whether new first-tier cities are inherently more inclusive, due to the limited number of informants from first-tier cities. However, the differing perceptions of these city types

may help explain why more street flower vendors choose to migrate to new first-tier cities rather than major metropolitan centers—a pattern reflected in this study’s sample.

Adversity and Resilience

Despite the goodwill migrant flower vendors often receive from customers and fellow vendors that benefits their urban integration, one of the most significant challenges they continue to face is the urban management system—more specifically, interactions with *chengguan*. Issues involving *chengguan* are frequently described as “harassments,” causing psychological distress and a perpetual sense of vulnerability (Flock & Breitung, 2014; Lin, 2018; Swider, 2015; Xue & Huang, 2015). This long-lasting and inevitable difficulty could largely affect migrant flower vendors’ identity integration, as it indicates an institutionalized antagonism toward street vendors who are thereby reminded of their out-sider status in both the formal economy and the host cities themselves (Hanser, 2016).

The frequency of encounters with *chengguan* varied across informants—ranging from every vending session, to once every few days, to once every one or two months. During interviews, Ms. Kongkong reported a particularly negative experience. She recalled:

I was caught by the *chengguan*. They recorded a video of me and made me write a letter of guarantee. One of them even said they would confiscate my cart. [...] It wasn’t just a feeling of grievance—it made me question how I ended up in this situation. I started doubting myself. It was emotionally painful and honestly quite humiliating.

Experiences of exclusion or mistreatment by the urban management system can cause significant harm to migrant workers’ sense of self, exacerbating feelings of alienation and hindering their ability to build a meaningful urban identity.

Nevertheless, such negative experiences appeared to be exceptions rather than the norm, as Ms. Kongkong was the only respondent reporting such situation. Moreover, as Ms. Kongkong later noted: “Later I learned that he was deliberately harsh, and I never saw that particular *chengguan* again.” After three months of vending, she noted that most of the *chengguan* she encountered were friendly. She described:

Now they chat with us. They tell us about their shifts, how long they have to be on duty.

Sometimes they’ll even say, ‘just move over a little—this way the security camera won’t catch you. Go ahead and set up your stall.’ They’re really kind to us.

This shift in perspective demonstrates the “hardiness” component of vendor resilience—the psychological capacity to reframe negative experiences constructively and maintain a positive outlook despite adversity. Ms. Kongkong’s ability to move beyond her initial humiliation and develop more collaborative relationships with *chengguan* exemplifies how resilience operates as “a dynamic response to a multiplex of biological, psychological, social and other environmental influences” (Lin, 2018; p.1026).

None of the other informants reported encountering *chengguan* who were aggressive or violent in their host cities. While some described enforcement as “strict,” they still characterized the officers as “friendly.” Mr. Liu reflected: “I used to have this stereotype that *chengguan* were fierce, used violence, and would confiscate your goods at any moment. But actually, once you start vending, you realize they’re pretty cute, honestly.” *Chengguan* officers sometimes share informal strategies with migrant flower vendors that allow them to fulfill their enforcement duties without forcibly removing the vendors. Phrases such as “go to those places where there are more vendors,” “you’ve been here for many days already—our supervisors had a meeting; come back in a few

days,” or “let me record a video first, and come back later” reflect tactical compromises that help maintain regulatory appearances while minimizing disruption to the vendors’ livelihoods.

In general, migrant flower vendors demonstrated an understanding of *chengguan* duties and pressures, acknowledging that officers also face performance metrics. Vendors also expressed empathy, recognizing that urban law enforcement understood them as individuals trying to make a living in difficult economic times. Furthermore, when facing mistreatment or excessive enforcement, they noted they could protect their rights by filing official complaints.

Informants highlighted a marked contrast between *chengguan* in first- and new first-tier cities and those in smaller, less developed cities, such as their hometowns. In smaller cities, they noted that *chengguan* were more prone to verbal and physical aggression, which they attributed to lower educational levels and a lack of professional training. In contrast, they praised urban enforcement officers in major cities for their standardized uniforms, polite language, and sincere attitudes. This reflects the perception that life in large cities—where the urban management system is more regulated—offers a greater sense of safety and legitimacy.

Some informants speculated that their generally positive experiences with *chengguan* were partly due to the nature of their product. As previously noted, flower stalls are small, clean, and orderly, which may make them less likely to attract penalties. For instance, Ms. Ding observed that food vendors often received fines ranging from 500 to 1,000 yuan. But none of these migrant flower vendors reported being fined. Overall, informants expressed an understanding of the role of *chengguan* in maintaining urban order and public civility. They also felt that, under such a regulatory system, their own lives in the city were afforded a degree of protection and respect.

Despite perceiving *chengguan* as generally friendly, migrant flower vendors still tend to avoid direct encounters with them, or at the very least, develop strategies to minimize such

interactions. In doing so, they demonstrate a high degree of resourcefulness. Resourcefulness refers to the ability to find clever and creative ways to overcome challenges and solve problems, especially under conditions of limited resources (Lin, 2018). By cultivating innovative problem-solving skills and navigating networks across various sectors of urban society, vendors transform constraints into strategic assets, enabling their adaptation to city norms and institutional frameworks.

For street flower vendors, this resourcefulness manifests in two primary strategies. The first involves relocation. When *chengguan* are spotted nearby, vendors temporarily pack up their stalls and move outside of the enforcement zone—either to set up briefly in another area or to wait nearby until the officers leave, at which point they return to their original location. Though seemingly ad hoc and temporary, this tactic resonates with the notion of a “cat-and-mouse” dynamic, as vendors need to scatter quickly (E, 2017; Flock & Breitung, 2016; Zhong & Di, 2017). The “cat-and-mouse” strategy, although it disrupts their vending businesses, does not terminate them on that day and simultaneously serves as an effective way to avoid direct interactions with *chengguan*. Rather than being pursued by urban enforcement officers constantly, vendors understand that *chengguan* typically inspect a specific area and then leave. This allows vendors to resume their activities smoothly (Flock & Breitung, 2016; Zhong & Di, 2017). As Mr. Zheng explained: “There are so many places—one of them is bound to be mine, haha.” Informants clearly emphasized that their strategies were not meant to provoke confrontation but to maintain a cooperative stance and avoid direct opposition to *chengguan*.

The second strategy lies in the use of social capital. First, mutual support among vendors plays a crucial role, where vendors form a “collective identity” that transcends their individual struggles (Lin, 2018). When one vendor spots *chengguan* approaching, they often alert others in

real-time, sometimes even helping others pack up quickly. Vendors also organize themselves into WeChat groups where they regularly update one another on *chengguan* activity and locations. These collaborative practices represent a form of informal governance, where vendors collectively establish norms, rules, and mechanisms to protect their economic activities and manage uncertainties without formal state intervention (Jiang & Wang, 2022). This form of informal governance contributes to migrants' identity integration by enhancing their collective sense of belonging, mutual trust, and social solidarity, as migrants become active participants in shaping their urban livelihoods and protecting their rights within the informal economy. Second, customers sometimes contribute to this informal information network by notifying vendors through these same groups, sharing details such as when and where *chengguan* were seen. This involvement from customers further validates migrant flower vendors' presence in the urban community, reinforcing their identity integration by acknowledging and supporting their role within the city's social and economic life.

Both strategies demonstrate not only resourcefulness but also a sense of purposefulness, another core aspect of resilience, as vendors consistently express their long-term goals of staying in the city, making a livelihood, and achieving a stable urban presence (Lin, 2018). Their actions are not random or merely reactive—they are oriented toward sustaining their place in the urban fabric, even within constraints.

The very act of navigating *chengguan* enforcement through collective strategies becomes a shared experience that binds vendors together and creates a distinctive urban identity that incorporates, rather than is defeated by, these regulatory challenges. Nonetheless, these strategies are ultimately temporary solutions. Informants admitted that no permanent resolution currently exists—except for transitioning from mobile vending to a fixed, formal storefront. In addition,

vendors occasionally face complaints from residents or nearby businesses. Because they operate in the informal sector and are self-employed, migrant flower vendors continue to experience a degree of separation from the city's formal, legally recognized population. As such, the urban management system remains a significant barrier to their development of a stable and accepted local identity.

Personal Values and Meaning

Through street flower vending, many informants have been able to find personal meaning and value in the city, which has contributed significantly to the development of their local identity. Generally, it is difficult for migrants to derive a sense of self-worth in host cities (Huang & Guo, 2017; Wong et al., 2007; Zhong et al., 2017). However, for these migrant flower vendors, the role they play in the urban fabric is both tangible and meaningful. Common themes that emerged from the interviews include their contribution to spreading happiness, comfort, and emotional healing.

These vendors often view themselves not merely as businesspeople, but as emotional facilitators—catalysts for human connection, intermediaries in moments of joy, and witnesses to intimate expressions of care. As a result, even if their business is not always financially successful, many expressed satisfactions with their current circumstances. Flower vending offers them emotional value and stability, while also bring moments of joy or comfort to urban residents. In this sense, their identities go beyond that of service providers—they become advisors and supporters in the lives of their customers.

For instance, vendors often assist customers in moments of uncertainty by helping them select the right bouquet, offering advice on what flowers are appropriate for specific recipients or occasions. Their support, however, often extends beyond floral arrangements. Mrs. Sanyue recounted comforting a graduate student new to Beijing, sharing her own experiences of adapting

to life in the capital. Similarly, Mr. Liu described encouraging a young woman he encountered late at night who was distressed over personal relationship issues. In such moments, these vendors shift from being transient figures in the city to embodying the qualities of “locals”—individuals who not only understand urban life but also guide others through it. As Mr. Hu put it: “If I can think a little more for you, then I will. That’s what I can do now.” Through their daily interactions, vendors integrate their professional identity with their personal values and emotional capacities, achieving a harmonious sense of self where their work reinforces their emotional fulfillment and sense of urban belonging. In addition, this fluidity in roles—moving between vendor, advisor, or emotional supporter on regular basis—illustrates how migrant flower vendors reconcile multiple facets of their identities, thus solidifying their identities as integral, socially embedded members of the urban community.

Self-Identification

Most informants identified themselves as part of the city and expressed a strong tendency to adopt the host city as their own identity. This sense of belonging is not only rooted in their increased knowledge of the city and their expanding social networks, but also in their recognition of and contribution to urban development. Many believe that, through flower vending, they are helping to beautify the city and spread uplifting, positive values. This mutual sense of fulfillment—of contributing to and being shaped by the city—strengthens their local identity.

That said, due to the transient nature of their status, some informants, even while feeling emotionally integrated, still likened themselves to “a lone boat adrift.” Transforming this sense of precarity requires greater institutional inclusion. For example, Mr. Liu and Mrs Meimei have purchased their own houses in host cities, while Ms. Xiaolu, Ms. Chun, Ms. Ding, Mr. Jiao Jie, and Mr. Zheng settled in their host cities through marriage. Although this study does not focus

primarily on the *hukou* system, it is important to note that despite recent policy reforms aimed at easing household registration transfers, *hukou* continues to play a significant role in shaping migrant identity integration. Although it is now more common for non-local *hukou* migrants to obtain local *hukou* through employment or marriage, institutional recognition remains a long-term issue in the broader process of identity formation and integration into city life.

Conclusion

This study explored how participation in street flower vending shapes the urban integration experiences of migrant workers in Chinese cities, focusing on three dimensions of integration: economic, social, and identity. Through qualitative interviews with twelve migrant street flower vendors, this research reveals that street flower vending functions as a multifaceted vehicle for integration, albeit with certain constraints.

Economically, street flower vending offers migrant workers a pathway to financial autonomy and stability, though with varying outcomes. While the income from flower vending often falls short of the average income of employees in the urban private sector and of local consumption levels—particularly for full-time vendors—it provides sufficient economic security to sustain basic livelihoods in host cities. For part-time vendors, flower selling generates supplementary income that elevates their overall economic standing. Moreover, flower vending represents an entrepreneurial strategy that allows migrants to circumvent formal labor market discrimination while developing specialized skills and business acumen. The autonomy and control over their labor processes that flower vending affords stands in stark contrast to the precarious conditions many migrants face in formal employment. This economic agency not only supports material well-being but also contributes to a broader sense of dignity and self-determination that fosters integration.

Socially, street flower vending functions as a strategic platform for migrants to engage with urban spaces, cultures, and communities in ways that extend beyond the typical “point-to-point” lifestyle that characterizes most migrants’ urban experiences. Through their daily vending activities, these migrants develop rich cognitive knowledge of urban geographies and strong place attachments to specific locations. Their interactions with diverse customers—ranging from young couples to elderly residents, from working professionals to sexual minorities—facilitate exposure to urban cultural norms, values, and practices. The flower stall emerges as a site of meaningful social exchange where vendors build social capital, form emotional connections with urban residents, and gradually integrate into the social fabric of the city.

In terms of identity integration, street flower vending offers a unique pathway for migrants to develop a sense of belonging and identification with their host cities. The generally inclusive attitude toward flower vendors specifically—perceived as bringing beauty and joy to urban spaces rather than disorder—creates conditions where migrants can feel validated and accepted. Despite facing challenges from urban management systems, particularly *chengguan* enforcement, migrant flower vendors demonstrate remarkable resilience in navigating these barriers. In addition, through their daily work, these migrants derive profound personal meaning from their contributions to urban emotional well-being, positioning themselves not merely as service providers but as catalysts for human connection in urban settings. This meaningful social role strengthens their identification with host cities beyond their status as migrants.

While this study includes vendors with experience ranging from seven months to over four years, these temporal differences did not manifest in sharply contrasting integration outcomes. Engaging in street flower vending for a longer time does contribute to a deeper spatial familiarity, greater confidence in customer interactions, and more sophisticated understanding of local

preferences. However, even vendors with relatively brief experience demonstrate substantial integration progress across economic, social, and identity dimensions. This suggests that street flower vending catalyzes integration rapidly within initial months of operation, with subsequent experience deepening rather than fundamentally transforming these integration processes. The occupation's intrinsic characteristics—requiring urban spatial knowledge, facilitating frequent social interactions with diverse populations, and positioning vendors as contributors to urban emotional well-being—appear to accelerate integration in ways that diminish the significance of temporal differences beyond a certain threshold of experience.

In sum, this research contributes to existing scholarship by highlighting how participation in specific sectors of the informal economy—in this case, street flower vending—mediates urban integration processes in ways that differ from other forms of migrant employment. The distinctive characteristics of flower vending position it as a particularly conducive vehicle for integration, especially in new first-tier cities where institutional and social barriers may be less pronounced than in major metropolitan centers.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the relatively small sample size (twelve informants) limits generalizability. Second, the uneven distribution of informants across city tiers—with only two informants operating in one first-tier city (Beijing)—restricts comprehensive comparison between different urban contexts, particularly regarding the experiences of flower vendors in China's largest metropolises. Nevertheless, the narratives presented in this research remain valuable, serving as a steppingstone for future studies to build upon. Third, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews introduces potential recall bias and social desirability effects, as informants might emphasize positive integration experiences. Fourth, cyberethnographic

recruitment through RedNote may have selected for vendors who are more socially connected and technologically engaged, potentially excluding those with different integration experiences.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates that street flower vending represents a meaningful pathway for migrant workers to achieve economic security, social connection, and identity recognition in Chinese cities, challenging conventional assumptions about the relationship between informal economic participation and urban integration. The findings suggest that fostering inclusive urban environments that accommodate diverse livelihood strategies like flower vending may contribute to more equitable integration processes for China's vast migrant population.

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Appendix: Interview Questions*

I. Basic Questions

1. How long have you been in _____ (their host city)?
2. What made you want to come to this city at that time?
3. Have you lived in any other cities before?

II. Economic Integration

1. How is your income from selling flowers at a street stall? A rough number will be fine. On average, how much can you earn per month?
2. Why did you choose fresh flowers as your product?
3. What is your process for preparing the flowers?
4. Have you sold other things at a street stall before?
5. What kind of work did you do before (or what is your current primary job)? Compared to your previous job (current primary job), do you prefer your current street vending lifestyle? Why?
6. Do you feel that selling flowers at a street stall has increased your income compared to your previous jobs (or other past street vending experiences)?
7. (If yes) What aspects do you think have contributed to the increase in your income? (If no or if your income has decreased) What factors do you think have caused your income to remain the same or even decrease?
8. Do you feel that selling flowers at a street stall has increased the quality of your life?
9. Why did you choose to sell flowers in this city? Are there any economic reasons? (Besides economic reasons?)
10. How many hours do you work each day?

III. Social Integration

1. Where do you usually set up your flower stall? Can you describe the environment around your flower stall?
2. Why did you choose these locations to sell flowers?
3. Do you need to compete for or arrive early to secure these locations?
4. How far is your flower stall from where you live in the city?
5. How do you feel about your current selling location? Do you like it, or would you prefer to explore other spots? Why?
6. When selling flowers in these locations, do you feel more connected to the city's atmosphere? Have you noticed or paid particular attention to the city's culture, customs, and interpersonal interactions?
7. (Following the previous question) Have these observations made you change yourself? Do you find yourself adapting more to the city's behaviors rather than those from your hometown?
8. Are there other vendors nearby who sell different kinds of goods? Are they mostly migrants or locals? Are they mostly men or women?
9. Have you ever learned about income differences between yourself and other vendors?
10. What is your approximate daily customer flow?
11. Do you usually chat with your customers?
12. Do you have regular or returning customers who visit your stall frequently?

13. Do younger customers visit your stall more often? Have you had any memorable conversations or experiences with them?
14. Do you feel that most of your customers are local residents?
15. Do you feel you've learned more about the city through interacting with these customers?
16. Through these interactions and observations, do you feel similar to the people in this city? Or do you notice differences?
17. Have you met people through selling flowers who you regularly chat with, similar to friends? Do you think your flower stall played a role in those connections?
18. (Following the previous question) How do you maintain those relationships?
19. Do you feel that selling flowers has helped you better integrate into this city? If yes, in what ways?

IV. Identity Integration

1. Did you need to obtain any special permits before selling flowers at a street stall? Was the process complicated or difficult?
2. Are you only allowed to sell flowers in specific areas?
3. As we know, one of the biggest challenges for street vendors is often the *chengguan*. Have you had any encounters with them?
4. How do you perceive the work of *chengguan*?
5. Do you feel that, overall, their attitude is friendly or unfriendly?
6. (If you believe the urban management system has issues) What kind of management style would you find more acceptable?
7. Have your encounters with *chengguan* changed your perception of the city? Have you ever felt targeted, or have you felt respected and protected by the city's management system?
8. While selling flowers, have you ever heard disrespectful comments from local residents or experienced disrespectful behavior?
9. (Following the previous question) How do you view such comments or behaviors?
10. Would you prefer to stay in this city, return to your hometown, or move to another city? Why?
11. Overall, do you consider yourself a part of this city? Or do you identify yourself as an urban resident in this city?

*Different follow-up questions are asked during each interview based on the informants' responses.