

**Migrant Agency in Platform Work: A Comparative
Study of Food-Delivery Workers
in Australia and China**

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Statement of originality

I declare that the intellectual content of this doctoral thesis is based on my own independent research efforts, carried out under the guidance of my supervisors. There is no plagiarism, academic fraud, or any breach of ethical standards in this work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged in the relevant sections of the thesis.

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23 September 2025

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Over the course of my candidature, I have submitted coursework assessments and a thesis proposal that draw on content from my thesis. These are listed below.

Coursework

A small proportion of content of Chapter 4 (Methodology) was submitted as part of BUSS7906 (Advanced Qualitative Methods) assessment, a mandatory PhD coursework requirement.

Thesis proposal

Portions of content of Chapter 2 Literature review of migrant labour, Chapter 4 Methodology and Chapter 5 Context were submitted as part of my thesis proposal in May 2022.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is my own work and that all assistance received in the preparation of this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Abstract

In Australia and China migrant workers are overrepresented in the platform economy, especially in food-delivery work – the segment of the platform economy focused on in this study. Despite the systemic differences in the institutional structures of these two countries, migrant platform workers experience strikingly similar constraints on their agency, which manifest in the form of individualised and largely invisible acts to cope with or improve working conditions. The similarities across two fundamentally different national contexts, which established theories assume will produce distinct outcomes, pose an empirical puzzle which the study's central research question aims to address: *How do labour migration regimes shape the agency expressions of migrant platform workers?*

This thesis adopts a comparative case study approach underpinned by a most-different system design to investigate the agency of two groups of migrants engaged in food-delivery work: international temporary migrants in Australia and internal rural-to-urban migrants in China. Adopting Katz's (2004) agency framework as the theoretical framework, this thesis develops a comparative understanding of how workers develop similar patterns in forms of agency (e.g., resilience, reworking, resistance) and differences in agency practices.

Drawing upon 60 semi-structured interviews with migrant platform workers (30 in each country) and document analysis, this thesis finds that Australia's visa-based labour migration regime and China's *hukou*-based labour migration system both contribute to migrant platform workers' structurally marginalised positions in the host labour market, and result in their similarly constrained agency. However, there are nuanced differences in how workers navigate structural constraints, shaped by the interaction between distinct labour migration regimes and migrant workers' temporal horizons. This contributes to labour agency literature by

incorporating institutional and temporal dimensions to the analysis of labour agency and developing new conceptual typologies to capture the different underlying meanings and mechanisms of workers' acts (e.g., transitional and instrumental resilience; normalised and prolonged resilience). This thesis also expands the application of Katz's (2004) framework beyond the workplace and labour processes and explores how these acts manifest in the domain of migration through workers' navigation of labour migration regimes to improve their marginalised status. It further makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating the analytical value of comparing international and internal migration, which are often studied as separate streams in migration studies.

CHAPTER 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Over the past decade, app-based platform work such as food-delivery and ridesharing has proliferated around the world, while at the same time, bringing challenges to workers' health and safety, with recurring reports of injuries and fatalities among migrant workers engaged in food-delivery work (Daniels, 2024; Wang & Churchill, 2025). In Australia, for instance, five food-delivery workers died within 2 months in late 2020, all international migrants (Lane, 2020; Zhou, 2020). By 2024, at least 18 deaths and over 900 rider injuries has been recorded since 2017 (Hatch, 2023; Transport Workers' Union, 2024). In China, data indicates that one delivery worker is killed or injured on average every 2 to 3 days in major cities (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024). These incidents reflect a global phenomenon in which food-delivery workers are often in a precarious position, with platforms prioritising efficiency over worker protections (Daniels, 2024; Wang & Churchill, 2025). Platforms workers often have few mechanisms for negotiation or redress, leading to power asymmetry between workers and platforms that exacerbate their precarious conditions (Goods et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2023).

While food-delivery platform work is praised as providing flexibility and autonomy, it is often associated with low pay, intense algorithmic control, insecure working conditions, and limited health and safety protection (Galière, 2020; Morales & Stecher, 2023; Srnicek, 2017). These issues are especially pronounced among temporary migrant workers, who are consistently overrepresented in food-delivery platform work around the world. Recent studies reveal that migrant workers, whether internal (i.e., domestic) or international, are disproportionately concentrated in food-delivery work across different countries (Alyanak et al., 2023; Bonhomme et al., 2025; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Sun et al., 2023). In Australia, for instance,

international temporary migrants are three times more likely than citizens to engage in on-demand platform work (McDonald et al., 2019). Similarly, China's on-demand platform work largely relies on rural-to-urban migrant workers, with around 75–80% of food-delivery workers being rural migrants (CHINANNEWS, 2025; Lin, 2025). Migrant platform workers are especially vulnerable as they are subject to dual precarity arising from their migrant status and the structure of platform work, resulting in reduced capability to assert agency (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Lewis et al., 2015; Mendonça et al., 2023).

While much of the research on migrant platform workers has focused on their vulnerabilities and precarious work experiences (Abkhezr & Tang, 2023; Altenried, 2024; Chen et al., 2022; Tandon & Rathi, 2024), a growing body of literature has begun to focus on their agency. Rather than viewing these workers as passive victims, recent studies found that even under structural constraints, they actively cope with, navigate, and at times, contest the constraints imposed by platform work and labour migration regimes (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Barratt et al., 2020; López et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2025).

This thesis sits at the intersection of three strands of scholarship – platform work, migrant labour, and labour agency. It explores how migrant food-delivery workers in two contrasting national contexts – Australia and China – experience and respond to their precarious conditions, seeking to understand how different labour migration regimes shape the forms of agency migrant platform workers enact. The chapter first outlines the empirical puzzle that motivates this research, followed by a justification of the comparative case selection and the conceptual framework. It concludes with an overview of the thesis structure.

1.2 The empirical puzzle and research question

This thesis draws on and extends the concept of ‘labour migration regimes’ (Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Collins & Stringer, 2022; Seo & Skelton, 2017) to analyse how migrant workers in Australia and China are shaped by such institutional structures. Labour migration regimes are defined as the system of migration policies, visa or registration rules, and employment regulations that govern migrants’ legal status, employment rights and protections, and their possibilities for long-term settlement (i.e., permanent residency or citizenship). Australia and China are considered as being governed by different labour migration regimes.

Australia is widely considered as a “nation of immigrants”, characterised by relatively open immigration policies, structured temporary migration programs, restricted employment rights and stratified pathways to permanent residency for international migrants (Hollifield et al., 2022). Australia’s employment regulatory framework provides comparatively strong protections for individual employees, supported by active union representation and mechanisms for workers’ voice (Peetz & Pocock, 2009; Wright & Lansbury, 2020; Wright & McLaughlin, 2021). China, by contrast, operates a state-controlled, centralised internal migration regime through the *hukou* system, with restrictive immigration policies on the entry of foreigners (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Nyíri, 2011; Speelman, 2020). Labour representation in China is closely monitored by the state, and independent union activity is suppressed (Lu et al., 2010; Zhu et al., 2011).

Despite these systemic differences in labour migration regimes, migrant food-delivery platform workers in both countries experience strikingly similar working conditions and constraints on their agency, including the algorithmic control exerted by platforms (Sun, 2019; Veen et al., 2020), limited ability to negotiate their terms of work (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Wright & McLaughlin, 2021), exclusions from labour protections and social welfare (Barratt et

al., 2022; Stewart & Stanford, 2017; Sun et al., 2023), and work rights restrictions related to their migrant status (Riordan et al., 2023; Sun & Zhao, 2024). In both contexts, their ability to challenge these constraints is often limited to individualised, informal, and largely invisible forms of agency, such as coping, and everyday resistance instead of collective organising, or formal contestation (Barratt et al., 2020; Lei, 2021). The similarities in outcomes (i.e., worker experiences and responses) across two countries with distinct institutional arrangements challenge prevailing assumptions in comparative political economy, which often posit that different institutional contexts produce divergent labour outcomes (Bakewell, 2010; Ruhs, 2018; Schneider, 2021). This empirical puzzle therefore raises a central research question: ***How do labour migration regimes shape the agency expressions of migrant platform workers?***

To address this question, this thesis adopts a comparative case study approach focused on food-delivery platform workers in Australia and China. It centres the analysis on how national labour migration regimes create structural conditions that constrain, enable or reshape migrant platform workers' capacity to act, and the forms of agency expressions they enact to navigate their conditions.

1.3 Comparing Australia and China

Guided by a most-different systems design, this study compares two groups of migrant workers engaged in platform-based food-delivery work: international temporary migrants in Australia and internal rural-to-urban migrants in China. Although these two groups of migrant workers differ in legal categorisation, they share several empirical, structural and conceptual features that justify analytical comparison. Empirically, both groups are concentrated in precarious, low-wage sectors and are overrepresented in food-delivery platform work, reflecting the actual composition

of the food-delivery platform workforce in each country (Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Lin, 2025; McDonald et al., 2019; Sun & Zhao, 2024). Further, they are both structurally positioned as non-local and marginalised labour within the receiving labour market, who are excluded from full citizenship rights in the host countries or cities due to restrictive labour migration regimes (Chan, 2009; Sun et al., 2025; Wright & Clibborn, 2019). Conceptually, although internal and international migration have often been studied as two separate phenomena, scholars have called to bridge the analytical gap between these two lines of studies due to the shared drivers underpinning both forms of migration (Hickey & Yeoh, 2016; King & Skeldon, 2010; Pryor, 1981).

At the institutional level, Australia and China represent most-different systems in terms of migration governance structures, labour market institutions, and mechanisms for worker representation (Chan et al., 2010; Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Zhu et al., 2011). However, both countries share structural similarities in the rapid growth of the on-demand platform economy (Barratt et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023), a lack of effective regulation over platform work (Forsyth, 2020; Lin, 2022), and reliance on migrant workers to sustain the food-delivery sector (Williams et al., 2025; Zhou, 2020). These similarities intersect with institutional differences, making these two countries ideal cases for exploring how different labour migration regimes shape migrant food-delivery platform workers' experiences and expressions of agency, and whether similarities or differences emerge as a result.

1.4 Framing the study: analytical lens and research gaps

This thesis adopts Katz's (2004) agency framework, which categorises agency into three interrelated forms: resilience, reworking and resistance. This typology allows a nuanced

exploration of how workers accommodate, navigate or confront structural constraints. *Resilience* refers to everyday coping and survival acts to endure and/or adapt to constraints. *Reworking* involves efforts to improve conditions from within the system, which are often incremental acts without directly challenging existing structures. *Resistance* indicates more overt and confrontational acts to subvert or challenge existing power structures, aiming to radically change the situation (Katz, 2004). Building on this theoretical lens, this thesis examines how migrant platform workers in Australia and China express different forms of agency in response to the institutional constraints of precarious work and labour migration regimes.

While a growing body of literature has examined how platform workers exercise agency, migrant status is often treated as a generic background variable contributing to worker precarity and vulnerability (e.g., Rydzik & Anitha, 2020; Sun & Zhao, 2024; Veen et al., 2020). There remains, however, limited understanding of the specific role of labour migration regimes in shaping agency practices. This thesis addresses this gap by adopting a migration-oriented analysis that foregrounds how legal status, mobility restrictions, access to rights and protections, and temporalities shape migrant workers' acts of agency. It argues that labour migration regimes are not merely structural backdrops, but active factors that shape the institutional terrain upon which agency is enacted. By comparing international temporary migrants in Australia with internal rural-to-urban migrants in China, this study investigates how fundamentally different labour migration regimes generate both shared and context-specific patterns of worker agency. This comparative approach enables an analysis of why certain forms of agency become more viable in one institutional setting rather than the other.

A second gap concerns the conceptual boundaries of labour agency. Existing scholarship on platform work has largely focused on workplace-related agency, examining how workers

navigate algorithmic control or rework labour conditions through tactical engagement with digital platforms (Cameron, 2024; Cameron & Rahman, 2022; Iazzolino & Varesio, 2023; Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2023). However, for migrant workers, agency often extends beyond the realm of work and into the navigation of migration-related constraints, such as securing longer-term legal residency, accessing social welfare entitlements, or navigating institutional exclusions (Ray, 2024; Zhao & To, 2023). This study thus adopts a broadened conceptualisation of agency, one that captures both work-related and migration-related agency practices. It examines how migrant platform workers not only navigate precarious conditions within the platform work but also improve their marginalised status under the constraints of migration structures.

Additionally, while temporal restrictions, such as visa durations, renewal intervals or work hour limits on certain visa types, are widely acknowledged as shaping migrants' precarious status (Robertson, 2014, 2019), the role of temporality in structuring labour agency remains insufficiently theorised, some notable exceptions aside (e.g., Triandafyllidou, 2022). Building on the emerging scholarship on migrant worker agency in the context of institutional constraints (Collins, 2018; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2022), this thesis argues that migrants' temporal horizons regarding how long migrants expect or intend to stay in the host countries or cities are critical to understanding their agentic behaviours. As such, this study explores how these temporal outlooks interact with institutional constraints under labour migration regimes, and how they jointly shape workers' differentiated forms of agency.

Finally, the thesis expands the understanding of contextualised and comparative analyses of labour agency (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Kelly, 2012). While categories such as resilience, reworking and resistance have proven analytically useful, recent scholarship suggests they are

not always discrete and may manifest differently depending on sociopolitical context and workers' personal circumstances (Bonhomme et al., 2025; Deng & Galliers, 2024; Popan, 2024). Through a comparative study of two distinct groups of migrants (i.e., international migrants in Australia and rural-to-urban migrants in China), this research explores how individual motivations, migration trajectories and institutional environments shape the form, meaning, and limits of labour agency. By embedding agency practices in specific regulatory and temporal contexts, the thesis contributes to a more contextualised understanding of how migrant workers actively respond to the intersecting constraints of platform work organisation and migration governance.

1.5 Thesis structure

Following this introduction chapter, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on international and internal migrant workers, their engagement in precarious work, and the intersection between migrant labour and on-demand platform work. It highlights how migrant status, temporal horizons, social networks and regulatory structures shape migrant workers' marginalised positioning in the labour market.

Chapter 3 develops the theoretical framework of this study. It first traces the evolution of labour agency theories, and outlines the broader structure–agency debate, with particular attention to meso-level constraints imposed by labour migration regimes. It then conceptualises workers' agency using Katz's (2004) framework of resilience, reworking and resistance, and argues for a temporally and spatially contextualised understanding of agency. This chapter also identifies gaps in the labour agency literature, and how this thesis will address them.

Chapter 4 focuses on the research methodology. It presents the research design, including the rationale for a comparative case study of Australia and China using a most-different systems design. It details the methods of primary data collection, comprising 60 interviews with migrant food-delivery workers (30 in each country), as well as secondary document analysis. The chapter outlines the data analysis process, including a hybrid thematic coding strategy, and discusses considerations relating to ethics and reflexivity. It also presents the challenges encountered during fieldwork and how these were addressed.

Chapter 5 maps the institutional and structural contexts shaping migrant workers' participation in food-delivery platform work. It provides an in-depth discussion of labour migration regimes and how these shape migrants' labour market positions, followed by an overview of the regulatory and operational characteristics of food-delivery platform work in both countries.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the empirical findings from in-depth interviews with migrant food-delivery workers in Australia (Chapter 6) and China (Chapter 7). Each chapter begins by showing the diverse motivations behind migration and workers' temporal orientations towards settlement in the host country or city. The analysis then traces how migrant workers express agency in response to structural constraints within platform work and labour migration regimes, using Katz's (2004) framework of resilience, reworking and resistance. The mirrored structure enables a grounded, context-sensitive comparison across the two settings.

Chapter 8 provides a comparative analysis of the two case studies. It examines similarities and nuanced differences in labour agency presented in the two previous findings chapters and synthesises the findings to construct a comparative analysis. It also explores on how migrants' temporal horizons shape their responses to institutional constraints. Chapter 9

concludes by synthesising the key contributions of the thesis and outlining the study's limitations and future research directions.

CHAPTER 2 Literature review of migrant labour

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews key strands of scholarship on international and internal labour migration to inform the investigation of migrant workers' engagement with platform work across distinct labour migration regimes. Section 2.2 examines international temporary migrant labour, highlighting the structural constraints embedded in labour migration regimes, the precarious labour market positioning of migrants, and the temporal dimensions that shape their migration trajectories. Section 2.3 then turns to internal rural-to-urban migration, reviewing the drivers of internal movement, the institutional and legal barriers that condition migrants' access to urban labour markets, and the role of temporality in shaping migration decisions and settlement patterns. Section 2.4 draws these strands together by identifying theoretical and empirical linkages between international and internal migration, showing how both types of migration can be shaped by structurally similar mechanisms of constraint and differential inclusion. This chapter concludes by situating migrant labour in platform work, illustrating how both international and internal temporary migrants are disproportionately drawn into precarious platform work sector, where their vulnerabilities are compounded by precarious work conditions, algorithmic control and limited protections. Throughout, the chapter foregrounds the role of labour migration regimes, social networks and migrant temporalities as key structuring forces in shaping migrants' working lives, and provides context for the analysis presented in the empirical chapters regarding how migrant food-delivery platform workers navigate these forces.

2.2 International temporary migrant labour

2.2.1 Defining international temporary migration

International temporary migrant workers play a central role in the global economy. According to the International Organization for Migration (2019), there were approximately 272 million international migrants in 2019, with nearly two-thirds identified as labour migrants. The growth of international migrant labour can be largely explained by the ongoing demographic imbalances and economic inequalities between sending and receiving countries. The growing demand for skilled and unskilled workers in receiving countries and the population growth and high unemployment rate in labour exporting or sending countries jointly drive the movement of temporary migrant labour across national boundaries (Schiff & Özden, 2007). International immigration regimes, however, differ from each other depending on the socio-economic contexts and state policies in receiving or host countries. Boucher and Gest (2018) created a taxonomy of seven distinct immigration regimes types, based on criteria such as the level of free movement across borders, the relative proportion of various visa types, the ratio of temporary to permanent migrants, and the naturalisation rate of immigrants. ‘Neoliberal regimes’ like Australia and Canada tend to rely heavily on temporary migrant labour, who have limited access to permanent residency or citizenship. In contrast, EU countries (e.g. Denmark, France, Germany and Italy) often operate under ‘extra -, intra-Union regimes’ characterised by greater mobility and fewer work-related restrictions on migrants under the Schengen framework. More restrictive models, such as ‘quasi-Kafala’ (e.g., China, Singapore) or ‘constrained regimes’ (e.g. Japan, Mexico),

impose significant controls on migration flows and entitlements (Freeman, 2011; Hollifield et al., 2022).

Despite these differences, scholars have observed a convergence in labour-receiving countries towards a liberal “market model” of migration governance, in which temporary migration is preferred to maximise flexible labour supply and economic returns (Boucher & Gest, 2018; Hollifield et al., 2014). In this model, migrant labour is subject to more restrictive migration policies and immigration control, stricter entry and stay requirements, with the expansion of temporary migration over permanent pathways (Anderson, 2010a; Hollifield et al., 2022). Even countries once known for permanent settlement migration, such as Australia, are argued to be moving towards guest-worker state arrangements where migrants’ pathways to permanent residency have been restricted, along with heightened temporariness of legal status (Wright & Clibborn, 2020). Accordingly, one part of this study focuses on international temporary migrant workers who are subject to a relatively high level of immigration controls, with their legal rights and labour market positions shaped by labour migration regimes. This section reviews existing literature on temporary migrants’ labour market positions shaped by migration regimes and the temporal dimensions of international migration. It helps to further analyse how international temporary migrant workers are often constrained in the labour market, and how they are able to act upon the structural constraints.

2.2.2 Temporary migrants’ labour market positioning and precarity

International temporary migrant workers are often positioned into structurally marginalised segments within host-country labour markets, where they are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, insecure sectors such as hospitality, domestic work and agriculture, regardless of their

skill level (Strauss & McGrath, 2017; Wright & Clibborn, 2019). Such concentration is shaped by employer preferences for a flexible, compliant and disposable workforce, as well as the institutional and legal exclusions that restrict migrants' mobility of moving into higher quality employment (Lewis et al., 2015; McCollum & Findlay, 2015). Immigration regimes play a critical role in generating what has been conceptualised as 'hyper-precarity' (Lewis et al., 2015), whereby workers' extreme insecurity stems from poor working conditions and the temporary and constrained nature of migrants' legal status. Migrants are frequently tied to a specific employer for visa sponsorship, or financially reliant on employers, with their rights to stay contingent on continued paid employment (Könönen, 2019; Lewis et al., 2015). This dependency, along with migrants' fear of deportation, further constrains their bargaining power and exit options, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation (Alberti, 2014; Wright et al., 2017). As Könönen (2019) and Anderson (2010a) have argued, immigration regulations act as a mechanism of labour control by creating various categories of migrants (e.g. students, asylum seekers and skilled labour) with different legal status, work eligibility, differential access to welfare and distinct levels of worker mobility. In Australia, for instance, international students are subject to working hour limits and are thus often funnelled into low-skilled, insecure jobs, at risk of underpayment (Clibborn & Wright, 2018). In short, immigration rules can obstruct migrant workers' capability to quit precarious work because their rights to reside in the host countries are at risk either directly in the case of work permits, or indirectly as a result of financial requirements (Könönen, 2019; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Therefore, migrants' precarious status is shaped by both the nature of the work itself, and the structural dynamics of labour migration regimes that institutionalise exclusion and segmented labour markets (Lewis et al., 2015; Schierup & Jørgensen, 2016).

Subjective and relational mechanisms further compound temporary migrants' precarity. The dual frame of reference framework (Piore, 1979) sheds light on how migrant workers reconcile themselves to poor working conditions and endure exploitation by comparing their conditions in the home and host countries. On one hand, many migrant workers compare their earnings and job quality to that in their home countries, perceiving low-wage jobs abroad as better options and thus tolerable (Fine et al., 2016; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). On the other hand, migrants' host frame of reference, shaped by their legal status, insufficient knowledge of labour rights, language barriers and limited job alternatives, further constrains their labour market mobility, and thus they are more likely to accept precarious work to sustain their livelihoods (Boese et al., 2013; Clibborn, 2021). Clibborn (2021) further extended this framework by developing 'peer' as another frame of reference for migrant labour's work choices. This helps to explain how the reliance on and interaction with co-ethnic networks largely shapes migrant workers' labour market conditions and perceptions (Holgate et al., 2012; Velayutham, 2013). As Clibborn (2021) and Haug (2008) demonstrate, these networks serve both as channels for job access and life support, and as platforms where collective norms and expectations are formed. Comparing oneself to co-ethnic peers in equally or more exploitative conditions can normalise such experience, reduce expectations for upward mobility, and reinforce migrants' endurance of precarity and exploitation (Clibborn, 2021; Leschke & Weiss, 2020).

Moreover, while these networks provide support in accessing jobs in the host countries, strong ties within ethnic enclaves often limit migrants' exposure to broader labour market opportunities, and thus constrain their upward mobility and reinforce occupational segregation (Kadarik et al., 2021; Rosales, 2014). Overreliance on co-ethnic networks may also lead to

conformity to group norms, making migrant workers more inclined to accept jobs in low-skilled sectors and less likely to pursue skill or career advancement (Leschke & Weiss, 2020; Maher & Cawley, 2015). In this instance, while co-ethnic networks constitute important sources of support for migrants, they are more likely to be trapped in low-paid and precarious employment due to the limited access to labour market information and opportunities (Sun et al., 2025).

In sum, the marginal labour market positioning of temporary migrant workers is shaped by structural constraints, particularly those related to labour migration regimes, social relations, and migrants' subjective understandings shaped by multi-scalar comparisons.

2.2.3 Temporalities of international migration

Time is central to how temporary international migration is governed. Temporal restrictions on visa durations, renewal cycles, temporal eligibility thresholds and bureaucratic processing time constitute temporal bordering that organises who can enter and stay, under what conditions, and for how long (Robertson, 2014, 2015). Migration is thus structured through multiple, interacting temporalities, such as policy-related timeframe, administrative time, and migrants' temporal horizons (Cwerner, 2001; Griffiths et al., 2013; Robertson, 2019).

The temporalities of international migration have received scholarly attention in relation to how time is governed by migration institutional frameworks, and how it is experienced by temporary migrants (Cwerner, 2001; Griffiths et al., 2013). Migration policies and visa regimes are temporally structured, embedding migrants' legal status within specific timeframes such as visa durations, waiting periods and renewal intervals (Maury, 2022; Robertson, 2015, 2019). These temporal borders shape migrants' working lives in the host country, including who can stay and work, under what conditions, for how long, when and how they can change employers,

or apply for permanent residency or citizenship (Collins, 2020; Robertson, 2014, 2015). For instance, in Australia, young migrants (under 35 years old) can apply for a Working Holiday visa to obtain 1-year working rights, extendable to 2 or 3 years under certain conditions, after which they must leave or transition to another visa (Wright et al., 2022). Similarly, international student graduates in Australia can apply for a non-renewable Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485), which allows post-study work for up to 2 or 3 years. These policy-induced temporal boundaries impose limits on migrants' length of stay, discouraging long-term career planning and often channelling temporary migrants into casual, seasonal or low-skilled jobs (Clibborn & Wright, 2020; Reilly et al., 2018; Robertson, 2014).

In addition to policy-induced time constraints, international temporary migrants often experience a mismatch between their aspirations and the actual temporariness of their legal status. Many move abroad with long-term ambitions for upward mobility or settlement, only to find themselves in short-term cycles of insecurity with limited work rights and job options (Robertson, 2014; 2019). This temporal discrepancy between migrants' imagined futures and the reality of legal temporariness is often resulted from visa processing delays, frequent policy changes, increasingly narrowed pathways and restrictive eligibility criteria for long-term residency (Azeredo, 2025; Boucher, 2025; Rajkumar et al., 2012; Walsh, 2014). Therefore, temporary migrants often experience prolonged periods of waiting with uncertainty in a 'staggered' migration process, spending years in limbo, or what has been termed 'long-term temporariness' (Mares, 2016; Mountz et al., 2002; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). Such temporal uncertainty compounds migrants' hyper-precarity status as they are often compelled to accept any available job, even when it is underpaid or exploitative, to remain compliant with visa conditions for legal stay (Maury, 2022; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). In such contexts,

time becomes a tool of control that discourages migrants from challenging precarious working conditions and pursuing alternative employment, thereby constraining their mobility and ability to act and assert their rights within the labour market.

Finally, the temporalities of international migration also shape how migrants imagine or perceive their futures. While some maintain strong aspirations for extended stay or long-term settlement, others adopt a more flexible horizon, shaped by the uncertainties of migration policies and new possibilities emerged (Amrith, 2021). As Robertson (2014) and Triandafyllidou (2022) argued, migrants' temporal horizons are often not fixed, but rather evolve through their interactions with institutional contexts, employers, and everyday life. That is, temporary migrants' perceptions on temporariness are often ambivalent and volatile, shaped by their expectations, migration plans, lived realities as migrants, and shifting temporal boundaries set by the migration policies (Triandafyllidou, 2022). This highlights the need to understand temporality not only as a structural constraint, but also as an evolving element embedded in migration trajectories.

The temporality of international migration has received growing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in relation to legal temporariness and its impacts on migrants' job security and mobility (e.g., Maury, 2022; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014), and the conceptualisation of legal temporariness as both a structural condition and a lived experience (e.g., Triandafyllidou, 2022). However, less is known about how migrants themselves perceive and navigate these temporal constraints within specific institutional settings. This thesis thus contributes to this emerging literature by exploring how migrants' temporal horizons interact with institutional constraints set by labour migration regimes, and how they jointly shape different forms of agency among migrant platform workers in the empirical chapters.

2.3 Internal rural-to-urban migrant labour

2.3.1 Defining internal migration

Within migration studies, internal migration is distinguished from international migration, with a clear demarcation of state sovereignty established through citizenship and border regimes (Hickey & Yeoh, 2016). Internal migration refers to the movement of people within national borders and is widely recognised as a key mechanism through which the spatial distribution of populations shifts over time (Greenwood, 1997). The most recent estimate, based on lifetime measures, suggests there were 763 million internal migrants in 2005, equivalent to 11.7% of the world's population (Bell & Charles-Edwards, 2013). However, internal migration rates and patterns vary across countries and regions. Data from the IMAGE project (Internal Migration Around the Globe) indicates that migration intensity is generally higher in developed countries, including those in North America, Western Europe and Oceania, while lower average rates are observed across much of Asia (e.g., China, India and Vietnam), with Latin America and Africa at intermediate rates (Bell et al., 2015). However, these patterns remain heterogeneous within regions and are shaped by both economic and institutional factors. In this context, the measurement of migration intensity also reflects broader trends in residential mobility within countries across different national contexts (Bell et al., 2015).

Among internal migrants, movements can be classified into different patterns based on the region of origin and destination, including rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban, urban-to-urban and urban-to-rural migration (Selod & Shilpi, 2021). This study focuses on rural-to-urban labour migration, which is particularly prominent in many developing countries, where it is significant in supplying labour to urban areas and shaping patterns of economic growth (Lagakos, 2020;

Selod & Shilpi, 2021). This section reviews existing literature on the drivers, barriers, and labour market positioning associated with rural-to-urban labour migrants, identifying structural conditions that shape their employment conditions and marginalisation in the labour market. In doing so, it serves as a foundation for analysing how rural-to-urban migrant workers, including food-delivery workers in China, experience and respond to structural constraints within the platform economy.

2.3.2 Drivers and structural barriers of rural-urban migration

Labour migration within national borders is shaped by the interaction of structural conditions and individual decision-making. At the macro level, large-scale internal rural-to-urban movement is primarily driven by spatial disparities in development, employment opportunities and wages (Deshingkar, 2006; Lagakos, 2020). Labour-intensive industries, such as construction, manufacturing and transport, often generate large demand for flexible and low-cost labour that is often met by rural populations in urban areas (Lucas, 2016). The urban bias in the allocation of resources further incentivises rural-to-urban migration, as the states often prioritise urban economic development over rural infrastructure investment, further intensifying regional inequality (Rangazas & Wang, 2019). China, however, demonstrates an exceptional case in which state forces have actively facilitated rural-to-urban migration through gradual relaxation of the household registration (i.e., *hukou*) system in response to industrialisation demand (Chan, 2010b). From a micro-level perspective, migration decisions are often perceived as the outcome of rational, utility-maximising calculations made by individuals or families, who weigh the expected benefits of urban employment against the financial, social and psychological costs of relocation (Morrison & Clark, 2011; Selod & Shilpi, 2021). Characteristics of individuals such as

education level, age and work experience also shape the migration propensity (Lucas, 2016). Empirical studies reveal the critical role of social networks in both facilitating and shaping migration trajectories. The presence of family members, relatives or co-villagers (i.e., *laoxiang*) in cities largely determines prospective migrants' destinations and lowers the informational and emotional costs of movement by helping them access jobs and navigate urban life (Lu et al., 2013; Zhao, 2003).

Despite these push-and-pull dynamics, rural-to-urban migration is often monitored and managed – whether directly or indirectly – by the states. In some countries, especially in developing countries, states impose institutional constraints on internal movements, which are often justified by the limited capacity of urban infrastructure and the fiscal burden of extending public services to migrants (Nguyen et al., 2015; Selod & Shilpi, 2021). In countries such as China and Vietnam, internal migration is directly governed through household registration systems (i.e., *hukou* and *hộ khẩu*, respectively), which monitor changes in workers' residential status and restrict rural migrants' access to public services, such as education, healthcare and housing subsidies (Chan, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2015). Such systems create a form of institutionalised exclusion, whereby rural migrants, despite being legal residents, are treated as *de facto* second-class citizens without full citizenship rights in urban areas (Lagakos, 2020). Governments may also implement indirect forms of restriction aimed at discouraging migration rather than prohibiting it. For example, during Brazil's military dictatorship, some urban municipalities withheld water and sewerage supply from housing areas of low-income migrants (Feler & Henderson, 2011). Such practices reveal a more subtle form of management and exclusion of rural migrants by making urban life less viable for incoming migrants. In sum, while rural-to-urban migrants are driven by economic benefits and individual aspirations, their

movements and positions in urban labour markets are shaped by the design and implementation of institutional policies.

These structural constraints associated with rural-to-urban migration produce what can be considered as restricted internal labour migration regimes, contrasting with more liberal systems of free and unregulated internal labour movement in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States (Alvarez et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2015; Deshingkar, 2006). This thesis focuses on restricted internal labour migration regimes, as they share structural similarities with international labour migration regimes, particularly in their use of legal mechanisms to manage labour supply and restrict access to labour rights and social services (Hugo, 2016; King & Skeldon, 2010).

2.3.3 Rural migrants' labour market segmentation and informality

Rural-to-urban migrant workers in some developing countries, such as China, India and Vietnam, are disproportionately concentrated in the labour-intensive informal sectors of urban labour markets, where work is characterised by the absence of formal contracts, legal protections and access to social insurance (Chen et al., 2024; Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2015). This concentration has largely resulted from the inflow of low-skilled and/or unskilled labour into urban areas, which has created a flexible but highly disposable workforce (Parida, 2019; Selod & Shilpi, 2021). While some rural migrants report improved income after migration, significant income disparities persist between them and urban locals (Cai, 2007; Cheng et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2015).

In addition to institutional exclusion, social networks play a dual role in shaping labour market segmentation (Haug, 2008; Zhao, 2003). Migrants often rely on co-ethnic ties, *laoxiang*

networks, or kinship-based relationship to determine migration destinations, and to access jobs and housing on arrival in the city. While such networks provide information and practical assistances in some cases, they also tend to reproduce occupational segregation, channelling new arrivals into the similarly low-wage jobs, further entrenching migrants into segmented labour markets and urban niches (Lu et al., 2013; Mitra, 2010; Yue et al., 2013).

These conditions have broader consequences for migrants' physical and psychological wellbeing. Physically, rural-to-urban migrants are more likely to be employed in hazardous or physically demanding work environments, while lacking access to public healthcare or compensation for work-related injuries (Jiang et al., 2018; Mitra, 2010; Swider, 2015). Empirical studies also show that rural-to-urban migrants are often psychologically stressed by precarious employment, economic insecurity and social exclusion, leading to a decline in their mental health (Chen et al., 2022; Li et al., 2006). These issues are exacerbated by migrants' poor living conditions, as many live in overcrowded accommodations, factory dormitories or urban villages, which reinforce their spatial and social marginalisation in urban areas (Goodburn & Mishra, 2024; Lin et al., 2011).

In sum, despite some evidence that rural-to-urban migrants and their rural households benefit from migration through higher income and consumption (Bell et al., 2002; Marta et al., 2020), the structural positioning of rural migrants in segmented, informal labour markets leaves them persistently vulnerable to exploitation, income insecurity and social inequality in urban areas, reflecting the broader institutional constraints on them (Gao, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2015; Selod & Shilpi, 2021).

2.3.4 Temporalities of rural-to-urban migration

A distinguishing feature of internal migration, particularly in comparison to international migration, is the relative fluidity and openness of movement across the boundaries, which makes it challenging to capture the temporality of migrants' movements (Selod & Shilpi, 2021). Unlike international migrants, whose length of stay is often stipulated by visa regimes (Afonso & Devitt, 2016; Clibborn & Wright, 2022), rural-to-urban internal migrants operate under fewer formal restrictions. An exception lies in countries such as China and Vietnam, where the household registration systems (i.e., *hukou*, *hộ khẩu*) serve as a mechanism for tracking population movement and legal residency status and determining access to social entitlements (Chan, 2010b; Nguyen et al., 2015). Yet even within these regimes, there are no formal restrictions on duration of urban residence, and internal migrants retain *de jure* freedom of movement within the country (Li & Liu, 2020). This leads to varied temporal orientations among rural migrants, ranging from short-term, circular migration to long-term urban residence.

Rural-to-urban migration is often permanent when it is resulted from broader structural transformations, such as national trends towards urbanisation or permanent rural land loss (Deshingkar, 2006). In contrast, internal temporary migration often takes the form of circular migration or return migration where migrants maintain close ties to rural land, agricultural activities, or families in hometowns, and choose not to settle permanently in urban areas (Cattaneo & Robinson, 2020; Lao et al., 2022; Selod & Shilpi, 2021). Unlike international migration, where labour migration regimes often limit migrants' length of stay, internal migration trajectories are more often shaped by individual characteristics, such as age, household composition, education, ties to the rural origin and personal aspirations (Tang & Hao, 2018).

Nonetheless, institutional arrangements on rural land tenure further influence the temporality of rural migrants' migration decisions and trajectories. In China, for instance, converting rural *hukou* to urban *hukou* often comes with the loss of claims to rural land, which continues to be a key source of income and informal security for rural households. Many migrants are thus unwilling to relinquish rural land rights, resulting in a strong tendency towards return migration (Hao & Tang, 2015). Similarly, evidence from Ethiopia shows that larger anticipated land inheritances reduce the likelihood of permanent migration to urban areas (Kosec et al., 2018). These examples illustrate that even in the absence of direct legal restrictions on mobility and urban residency, institutional arrangements on rural land entitlements shape rural migrants' settlement decisions and the temporality of their movement.

In the absence of formal restrictions, some rural-to-urban migrants adopt flexible temporal orientations on their stay, remaining open to opportunities in both urban and rural contexts depending on life stages, economic conditions and family needs, while avoiding full commitments to settlement or return (Cattaneo & Robinson, 2020; Tang & Hao, 2018). While this flexibility reflects adaptability and resilience of rural migrants, it inhibits long-term investment in urban integration, such as pursuing stable employment and securing legal residency status (e.g. urban *hukou*) (Li & Liu, 2020; Liu et al., 2025). Despite the growing scholarship on circular and return migration, relatively few studies have explored how rural migrants' temporal horizons – their expectations about how long they will remain in urban areas – shape their behaviours within the urban labour market. This thesis addresses this gap by examining how temporality shapes rural migrants' labour market positions and how these workers navigate work precarity and institutional exclusions under different temporal outlooks.

In sum, rural-to-urban labour migration is shaped by both structural and individual-level dynamics. The movement of rural migrants, however, is not unrestricted in some countries with restricted regimes (e.g., China and Vietnam). They are constrained by institutional barriers in accessing full urban citizenship rights, resulting in their marginalised positions within the labour market. Moreover, rural migrants' concentration in informal sectors, reliance on social networks, poor living conditions, as well as shifting temporal orientations exacerbate their precarious status within the segmented urban labour markets. The following section links internal migration with international migration, exploring how the two forms could be analytically connected through shared features of drivers, constraints, migrants' precarity and differential inclusion in the host labour market.

2.4 Linking international and internal migration

Although scholars such as Pryor (1981) have long called for a theoretical synthesis of internal and international migration, these phenomena have traditionally been studied in separate research streams. This divide has produced analytical gaps that make it difficult to generalise migration patterns or models across contexts (King & Skeldon, 2010; Nestorowicz & Anacka, 2019).

However, many scholars have argued that these distinct types of migration share common drivers and barriers, produce similar labour market outcomes, and can be examined through overlapping theoretical frameworks (DeWind & Holdaway, 2008; Hickey & Yeoh, 2016; Hugo, 2016).

Both internal and international labour migration are driven by structural inequalities in socio-economic development, income levels, living conditions and demographic differences between regions or countries (DeWind & Holdaway, 2008; King & Skeldon, 2010; Selod & Shilpi, 2021). For instance, the income and employment opportunity disparities that facilitate

workers to migrate from rural to urban areas also largely explain global movements from low- to high-income countries (International Organization for Migration, 2019; Liang, 2016). In many cases, internal migration serves as a stepping stone to international migration, providing workers with the skills, networks and resources needed for cross-border movements (Hickey, 2016; Hugo, 2016). Furthermore, the labour migration regimes, whether internal migration systems such as China's *hukou* system or international temporary visa schemes in countries like Australia, similarly regulate and monitor the scale, pace and composition of migration flows (Chen et al., 2024; Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Hickey & Yeoh, 2016).

Despite differences in legal status, internal rural-to-urban migrants and international temporary migrants often similarly experience labour market marginalisation. Both groups are often overrepresented in low-wage, insecure and informal sectors, with limited access to employment protections and social welfare (Deshingkar, 2006; King & Skeldon, 2010; Skeldon & Yeoh, 2018). Such segmentation is reinforced by labour migration systems that institutionalise their temporary status and constrain worker mobility (Chan, 2019; Hugo, 2016; Könönen, 2019). In both contexts, migrants are often confined to jobs that local workers reject, characterised by inferior working conditions, low pay and heightened vulnerability to exploitation. These shared patterns of institutional exclusion and precarity suggest that despite jurisdictional boundaries, internal and international labour migrants are similarly marginalised in the segmented labour markets (Lewis et al., 2015; Mitra, 2010; Selod & Shilpi, 2021; Wright & Clibborn, 2019).

While most migration theories focus on either international or internal migration separately, several theoretical frameworks can help explain both international and internal migration processes. Labour market segmentation theory (Massey et al., 1993; Piore, 1979) explains how migrants are channelled into secondary segments of the labour market, where low

pay, limited mobility and worker protections prevail (Liang et al., 2014; Livingston, 2006). This framework shows how the state and employers treat migrants, whether rural-to-urban migrants in China, or temporary international migrants in Australia, as a flexible and disposable workforce. The ‘dual frame of reference’ framework complements this by showing how migrants’ endurance of precarious employment is shaped by comparisons with employment conditions in their places of origin and other available options in the host labour markets (Hugo, 2016; Piore, 1979). Network theory provides another theoretical lens by explaining how migrant networks influence decisions to migrate, shape migration trajectories, facilitate access to work while reinforce segmentation by funnelling migrants into certain occupational niches in both international and internal migration contexts (Haug, 2008; Yue et al., 2013).

Some scholars suggest that mobility is a key differentiator between internal and international migration, that is, internal migrants usually have unrestricted mobility within national boundaries while international migrants’ movement across borders is often managed by the states and is therefore restricted (Hugo, 2016). In some countries, however, the state restricts movement within national boundaries through household registration systems (e.g. *hukou* in China, *Hộ khẩu* in Vietnam) (Chan, 2010b; Hugo, 2016). These countries can be classified as *restricted* internal migration regimes, as opposed to other countries with free labour movement termed *free* internal migration regimes including Australia, Canada and the United States (Alvarez et al., 2021; Bell et al., 2002; Finney & Simpson, 2008). This thesis limits the research scope to the neoliberal international migration regime in Australia and *restricted* internal migration regime of one country, China, because it closely resembles international migration in many aspects (Hugo, 2016; King & Skeldon, 2010).

Studying the common features between internal and international migration allow more nuanced explanations of how labour migration regimes shape population movements and migrants' integration into host labour markets within and across national borders. The shared drivers, similarly marginalised labour market positions and overlapping theoretical frameworks justify analysing these two distinct forms of migration together. These insights inform this thesis's analysis of how structural constraints shape migrant workers' agency in navigating precarious work and migration conditions across contexts. In this thesis comparing rural-to-urban migrants in China and international temporary migrants in Australia, an integrated perspective makes it possible to identify both shared patterns of worker precarity and context-specific expressions of agency.

2.5 Concentration of international and internal migrants in platform work

A growing body of research has shown the disproportionate concentration of migrant labour – both international migrants and internal migrants – in the platform economy (Alyanak et al., 2023; Ray, 2024; Sun et al., 2023; Zhou, 2024). Several factors help explain migrant workers' decisions to participate in platform work. First, migrants often use multiple frames of reference in weighing up their available options and making job decisions in the host labour market (Clibborn, 2021; Piore, 1979). Specifically, migrant workers tend to compare platform work with jobs in their home countries or hometowns, with alternative jobs available in the host labour market, and with the jobs taken by their migrant peers (Sun et al., 2025). In this context, platform work often appears as more appealing for newcomers, because of its low entry barriers, immediate earning potential, and minimal requirements for educational or language proficiency (van Doorn et al., 2023; van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). Second, on-demand platforms also have

allure to migrants with limited job alternatives, notably those with limited working rights or undocumented status, because of their at times lax enforcement of formal requirements (e.g., background checks) (Alyanak et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2025; van Doorn et al., 2023). This permissiveness, however, potentially leads to exploitation, because migrants may accept degraded working conditions to sustain their livelihoods (van Doorn et al., 2023; Zhou, 2024).

Despite these opportunities provided to migrant workers, platform work creates substantial challenges for them. Platform work is often classified as independent contracting, resulting in platform workers in many countries not having access to labour protections such as minimum wage, insurance coverage and collective bargaining rights (Lee, 2024; Lin, 2025; Muldoon & Sun, 2024). For migrant workers, these vulnerabilities are compounded by migration policies that impose further restrictions on their right-to-work, residency security, and access to social security and subsidised public services (Anderson, 2010a; Arnholtz & Hansen, 2013; Choi, 2018). Furthermore, the purported flexibility of platform work can be experienced as a form of precarity especially for migrants, whose ability to benefit from the flexible work arrangements is largely diminished by their migrant status and economic dependence on the work to a greater extent than their non-migrant counterparts (Holtum et al., 2022). In the context of migrants and platform economy, the notion of ‘hyper-precarity’ is particularly relevant as it highlights how the vulnerabilities associated with their migrant status intersect with the inherent insecurities of platform work, resulting in a state of hyper-precarity and reduced ability to enact agency (Lewis et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2025; Zhou, 2024).

In sum, migrant workers’ engagement in platform work is shaped by broader legal and institutional structures. While platform work provides quick access to income and flexibility, it also reproduces inequalities and perpetuates the social stratification through algorithmic

management, worker (mis)classification, and limited social protections (Gebrial, 2024; Sun & Zhao, 2024). These dynamics of platform work design interact with the labour migration regimes, jointly shaping migrants' entry into platform work, their work conditions and their ability to assert their rights (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Zhou, 2022).

2.6 Summary

This chapter has firstly reviewed the migration literature to elucidate how legal, institutional, and temporal structures shape the labour market positioning and lived experiences of migrant workers. Across both international and internal migration, the literature highlights the institutionalisation of differential inclusion, whereby migrants – whether across or within national borders – are subject to legal and migration frameworks that enable restricted access to labour markets while denying full citizenship rights in the receiving societies. These frameworks often produce stratified labour markets, channelling migrants into low-wage, insecure sectors, and reinforcing segmentation through both institutional exclusions and social mechanisms such as migrant networks.

By bridging the internal–international divide, this chapter has shown that both forms of migration are shaped by structurally similar constraints, labour segmentation and migrants' personal aspirations. These shared dynamics are particularly salient in the context of platform work, where both international and internal rural-to-urban migrant workers are concentrated in this sector characterised by algorithmic control, informalisation, and limited access to rights and protections. Yet, the existing literature has largely focused on the insecurity shaped by institutional frameworks, offering limited insights into how migrants' legal and temporal positions further shape their agency in platform work.

This thesis addresses this gap by investigating migrant platform workers' expressions of agency and interrogating how structurally embedded constraints of migration, including legal status, worker mobility, temporalities and social relations, shape migrant workers' behaviours. The following chapter turns to the theoretical framework of workers' act in response to these constraints, focusing on the evolving debates and conceptualisation of labour agency.

CHAPTER 3 Theoretical framework: labour agency

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews key theories and evolving conceptualisations of labour agency, with particular attention to agency of migrant workers engaged in platform work. Labour was historically framed as ‘passive victims’ under economic and structural forces in both the neoclassical and Marxist geography studies from the 1960s to 1980s, but subsequent labour geography research by Herod since the 1990s started to reconceptualise workers as active agents capable of acting upon structures and shaping their socio-economic positions (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Herod, 1997). In studies of labour agency, scholars have moved beyond focusing mainly on collective, organised forms of agency to more individualised and fragmented expressions of agency in everyday practices. The shift from a narrow focus on resistance to a broader framework encompassing different forms of responses such as resilience and reworking (Katz, 2004) also provides an important analytical lens for understanding diverse expressions of agency.

The chapter consists of five sections. Section 3.2 traces the theoretical evolution of labour agency from earlier focus on collective resistance in labour geography to a broadening focus on workers’ individualised and unorganised agency of some marginalised group of workers. Section 3.3 introduces the structure–agency debate and highlights the role of meso-level migration institutions in shaping agency practices, recognising the contextualised and relational nature of migrants’ agency in shaping their lives. Section 3.4 presents Katz’s (2004) resilience, reworking and resistance theory, which this thesis adopts as a central analytical framework, and demonstrates how this framework has been used in different disciplines to study worker agency. Section 3.5 reviews recent literature that integrates the temporal dimensions into this framework,

and its implications on the study of labour, platform work and migration. Finally, Section 3.6 turns to the agency of migrant platform workers specifically, showing how Katz's (2004) framework has been applied in studying this group of workers while highlighting important empirical and theoretical gaps, particularly the need for a migration-centred perspective that examines agency not only in relation to work but also in relation to broader labour migration regimes and workers' migrant status.

3.2 The evolution of labour agency theories

Agency is defined by Castree et al. (2004) as the intentions and practices undertaken by workers in pursuit of their own interests or those of others. Historically, workers were often portrayed as homogenous units of inputs within the global production process or passive victims in capital-labour relations in both neoclassical and Marxist economic geography from the 1960s to 1980s (Bergene et al., 2016; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). However, since the 1990s, a growing body of literature in labour geography has advocated for a re-conceptualisation of labour as active participants in the production process. Herod (2001), in particular, argued for recognising workers as active agents who interact with economic and social structures and reshape the capitalist landscape to their own advantages. The concept of labour agency was first examined in labour geography to explore how labour – situated within specific spatial and institutional contexts – actively reshape spatial configurations of capitalism in global production networks (e.g., Açar & Böhm, 2018; Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Coe, 2013). Over time, however, this concept has been adopted and studied in other disciplines, including employment relations (e.g., Ruiner et al., 2020; Smith, 2006; Wright & Clibborn, 2020), sociology (e.g., Anderson, 2010a; Hastings & MacKinnon, 2017; Sun et al., 2025), and migration studies (e.g., Anderson, 2010b;

Mainwaring, 2016; Wheatley & Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016), which focus on different scales, actors and contexts of labour agency. The following sections unpack these differences in more depth.

A key shift in the labour agency literature is the move from an emphasis on collective, organised forms of agency to individualised and unorganised expressions of agency. Earlier work in labour geography largely focused on collective labour activism, especially organised collective actions (e.g., strikes, collective bargaining) through unions to reshape their economic landscapes (Cumbers et al., 2008; De Neve, 2008; Lier, 2007). While the decline of unionism is often viewed as signalling a weakening of worker agency, this interpretation stems from a narrow conception of labour agency as inherently collective (Cumbers et al., 2010; De Neve, 2008). This tends to overlook the individual agency of workers who operate without formal organisations, such as non-unionised workers, informal workers, migrant workers or independent contractors (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Però, 2020; Rogaly, 2009). The rise of the platform economy, for instance, exemplifies such shift as platform workers are often individualised, and viewed as non-standard workers (e.g., independent contractors) with weakened solidarities and restricted access to collective bargaining mechanisms (Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2023; Stewart & Stanford, 2017). In this context, platform workers' agency expressions are often manifested in the form of everyday individual practices, or unorganised collective organising in navigating structural constraints (Barratt et al., 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Yu et al., 2022).

Another key development in the labour agency scholarship is the shifting focus towards the groups of workers who have traditionally been marginalised in labour studies scholarship, such as migrants, women and informal workers, who often have constrained capacity in participating in labour movements (Lier, 2007). For example, Rogaly's (2009) study of temporary migrant agricultural labour highlighted how these unorganised workers engaged in

everyday acts of negotiation, strategic mobility and resistance to employer control. Migrant workers often work under highly precarious conditions, in which they face uncertainties around income, employment and social protections, leading to limited potential for participating in collective mobilisation (Sexsmith, 2016; Strauss & McGrath, 2017; Zhao & To, 2023). Scholars also paid attention to female migrant workers and examined how they navigate exploitative conditions through non-confrontational, incremental, and everyday forms of resistance (Kwan, 2022; Rother, 2017; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). Likewise, in informal sectors such as domestic work and platform work, workers employed strategies to improve their working conditions, whether through redefining their social class identities, or by creating informal labour market for contractors and undocumented workers, even if such acts rarely transform into radical changes (Mendonça et al., 2023; Rother, 2017; van Doorn, 2020). This broader focus of agency emphasises the importance of exploring how diverse groups of workers with different social and employment status across different industries exercise agency beyond the boundaries of institutionalised representation.

3.3 Structure-agency and migration

The structure-agency debate remains critical to understanding how individual acts and structural conditions interact, particularly in the study of labour and migration. It centres on how workers' purposive actions (i.e. agency) are both constrained and enabled by broader social, economic and institutional structures (Bakewell, 2010; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). In the 1980s, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory attempted to reconcile structural determinism and individual agency by conceptualising them as mutually constitutive. That is, structures shape human action, but are also reproduced and potentially transformed by social practices, implying the dualism of

structures (Giddens, 1984). While Giddens' structuration theory has been challenged by critical realists who argued social structures exist independently regardless of human agency, the bridging of the structure-agency divide and acknowledging the dual nature of structures prevails in migration studies and sociology research (Bakewell, 2010; Collins, 2018; Goss & Lindquist, 1995). Yet, the structuration theory and its subsequent theoretical refinements have been critiqued for failing to capture the meso-level institutional structures and social relations that shape workers' differential capacity to act (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). In response, more research has sought to re-embed agency within the institutional contexts in which workers operate. In particular, scholars in migration studies have increasingly explored how institutional and social structures, including labour migration regimes, legal frameworks, labour market governance and social relations enable or constrain migrant workers' ability to exercise agency, considering both macro-level and meso-level structures that define the terrain on which workers act (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Mainwaring, 2016; Paret & Shannon, 2016).

Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to structural constraints embedded in labour migration regimes. These regimes shape migrants' legal status, tie them to specific employers or occupations, restrict their mobility across jobs and employment sectors, and heighten the risks associated with overt actions or exit, especially through the threat of visa cancellation or deportation for international migrants (Anderson, 2010a; Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Zhao & To, 2023; Zou, 2015). Temporary migration schemes, such as Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program or Australia's employer-sponsored visas, restrict workers' mobility by legally binding workers to specific employers, rendering exit a costly strategy (Strauss & McGrath, 2017; Wright et al., 2017). These mechanisms institutionalise migrant labour's insecurity and dependence on employers, constraining their capacity to resist exploitation or improve work

conditions. Zhao and To (2023) conceptualise this as bounded agency, a condition in which migrants' aspirations for upward mobility (e.g., starting a business, changing jobs) are constrained by legal precarity and limited access to resources and social capital. The structural restrictions of migration policies, including legal status, continued stay conditional on employment, and limited access to social welfare entitlements, actively shape migrant workers' abilities to act upon precarious conditions and assert their rights in the host labour market (Berntsen, 2016; Buckley et al., 2017; Wright & Clibborn, 2020).

Undocumented workers experience even greater constraints on agency, and they are often confined to informal sectors where labour protections are minimal or non-existent. Without legal status, they are subject to risk of deportation, and thus they are frequently compelled to accept exploitative work conditions (e.g., abuse, underpayment) while having limited access to formal dispute mechanisms (Bloch, 2013). Sexsmith (2016) developed the concept of 'constrained loyalty' to explain the paradox in which undocumented farmworkers remain loyal and committed to exploitative or undesirable jobs because they are shielded from immigration enforcement by employers, yet have no viable exit options. This expands Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice-loyalty framework by illustrating how structural constraints suppress migrant workers' voice and mobility, resulting in unfree labour with constrained agency.

Despite these constraints, scholars in migration studies show how migrant workers continue to exercise agency in various forms, such as selective compliance with employers, reframing precarity as stepping stones to improved conditions, changing jobs within visa constraints, or leveraging informal networks to secure better conditions (Alberti, 2014; Ray, 2024; Trlifajová & Formánková, 2023). The strategic use of 'exit', for instance, is viewed as an act of agency, allowing workers to escape from exploitative environments and access better

working conditions (Alberti, 2014; Kiil & Knutsen, 2016). In recent years, increasingly more migrants enact agency through participating in platform work to become their own boss, assert labour autonomy and escape precarious work conditions in industries such as hospitality and cleaning (Barratt et al., 2020; Riordan et al., 2023; Weidenstedt et al., 2024). In this context, migrants engage in self-employment or entrepreneurship to navigate the structural exclusions from the host labour market. However, such exit strategies often risk their legal presence and may reproduce precarity, especially when the employment is tied to legal labour protections or future migration pathways (Perry, 2020; Wright et al., 2017, 2021).

Collective expressions of agency also emerge in migrant workers' mobilisation through co-ethnic networks and digital platforms, though often in informal and unorganised ways. Co-ethnic networks and social media platforms have been used to facilitate information exchange and organise collective actions to challenge exploitative work conditions (Mendonça et al., 2023; Ray, 2024). These networks can foster informal collective agency that substitutes for formal union support, enabling workers to act collectively despite structural marginalisation (Hau & Savage, 2023; Liu & Friedman, 2021; Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2025). In some cases, this evolves into formal engagement with unions or the establishment of worker-led organisations, enabling migrant workers to negotiate with employers for improvements in work conditions, as well as to influence policy and improve their legal standing (Anderson, 2010b; Hau & Savage, 2023; Rother, 2017). Migrant workers also express agency by carving out spaces of autonomy and connection through migrant enclaves in urban spaces, which serve as symbolic claims to visibility, belonging and worker rights, contesting their marginalised status (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Gransow & Zhu, 2016; Seo & Skelton, 2017).

While the migration literature has increasingly recognised how agency is shaped by institutional and legal structures, relatively few studies have embedded agency within labour's broader migration lives, including their aspirations, migration trajectories and social relations in shaping their behaviours and agency expressions (Kelly, 2012) (for notable exceptions, see Jiang & Korczynski, 2023; Orth, 2024). These dimensions are critical for understanding how workers perceive opportunities and constraints, make strategic decisions and plan their future pathways (Bonhomme et al., 2025; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by re-embedding labour agency within the broader migration contexts, and foregrounding migrants' trajectories, social embeddedness and temporal horizons as integral in shaping their agency expressions. In doing so, it contributes to a more contextual and relational understanding of agency, where workers' agency expressions are shaped not only by institutional constraints but also by the lived realities of migrants themselves.

3.4 Broadening the conceptualisation of labour agency – Katz's framework

Earlier studies of labour agency often conceptualised it as acts of resistance that confront against the structures of capitalism (Carswell & De Neve, 2013). Within this view, agency was largely interpreted as workers' defensive responses to adverse conditions. However, this framing has been critiqued for romanticising small acts as inherently oppositional and confrontational and therefore reducing the complexity of workers' practices (Herod, 2001; Katz, 2004). Thus, Katz (2004) argued for a more nuanced understanding of agency, one that recognises not all autonomous acts are interpreted as resistance, and that agency can also manifest in less visible, or adaptive forms that may sustain, rather than disrupt, existing systems. In reconceptualising labour agency, Katz (2004) introduced a framework of agency practices, including resilience,

reworking and resistance, to enable a more differentiated analysis of how individuals interact with structural conditions. Each of these categories represents a distinct form of engagement with structures, and reflects varying degrees of workers' consciousness and impact on structures (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Cumbers et al., 2010). This expanded view is crucial for understanding the different agency expressions enacted by workers, particularly in contexts where overt resistance may not be possible or could lead to severe consequences (e.g. deportation of migrants) (Bonhomme et al., 2025; Sexsmith, 2016).

Katz's (2004) original framework was developed in her ethnographic study, which examined how children and families responded to processes of global economic restructuring, and categorised the different ways they engaged with systemic pressures, whether through coping, adjusting or confronting them. Since then, Katz's framework has been applied widely across various research fields, including labour migration studies (e.g., Bakewell et al., 2012; Kc, 2025; Trlifajová & Formánková, 2023), employment relations studies (e.g., Barratt et al., 2020; Popan, 2024) and urban geography (e.g., Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Seo & Skelton, 2017). In particular, this framework has been widely employed to examine agency among workers situated at the nexus of precarious and informal labour, including female workers (Kc, 2025; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020), migrant workers (Berntsen, 2016), and platform workers (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Barratt et al., 2020; Deng & Galliers, 2024), or, more recently, those with intersecting identities (e.g., female migrants, female platform workers) (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020; Trlifajová & Formánková, 2023). These applications demonstrate the analytical utility of Katz's agency framework across different fields of studies and justify the use of this analytical framework in this study, which focuses on the agency of migrant platform workers.

Resilience refers to everyday practices that allow individuals to endure and cope with hardship without challenging or altering structural conditions. These practices often involve normalising or ignoring exploitative conditions, reframing precarious jobs as a means to achieve personal goals, or mobilising social networks for both material and emotional support (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Popan, 2024; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). While these acts do not directly challenge structural inequalities, they are foundational to sustaining workers' lives under structural constraints.

Reworking involves more proactive efforts aimed at improving one's material conditions by recalibrating existing structures and redistributing resources without disrupting them (Katz, 2004). This includes strategic job switching, skills development, or leveraging worker mobility to escape exploitative conditions (Kiil & Knutsen, 2016; Sexsmith, 2016). Such actions do not directly challenge power relations but seek to recalibrate one's position and navigate within its boundary for incremental improvements (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Popan, 2024).

Resistance, by contrast, encompasses overt actions aimed at contesting or challenging oppressive systems (Katz, 2004). Activities categorised under resistance are often visible and organised, such as strikes, protests or workers' collective organisations, in both physical and digital forms (Seo & Skelton, 2017; Wu, 2016). In Katz's (2004) framework, such actions are not simply reactive, but emerge from a distinct oppositional consciousness, that is, an awareness that existing exploitative and oppressive conditions must be fundamentally transformed. Resistance, therefore, is conceptualised as an intentional desire to radically challenge or reshape existing power structures. For migrant workers, however, resistance remains relatively rare due to the high risks of visibility, particularly under restrictive labour migration regimes (Bonhomme et al., 2025; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020).

While this framework presents these as distinct forms of agency, Katz notes that they are not mutually exclusive – these categories interact and support one another. Specifically, resilience often enables workers to build resources and relationships needed for acts of reworking or resistance (Katz, 2004). For instance, day-to-day coping strategies may gradually evolve into more proactive collective engagements to improve the conditions or to contest structures, reflecting a continuum of agency expressions with blurred boundaries (Avagianou et al., 2025; Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Kiil & Knutsen, 2016). Nevertheless, whether the resistance can be achieved stays questioned because resilience is largely encouraging endurance and adaptability and the ‘status quo is deemed insurmountable’ (Diprose, 2015, p. 49). Empirical studies also show that acts of agency may stabilise or reinforce rather than disrupt existing power relations, particularly when workers are constrained by institutional structures such as labour migration regimes or platform labour governance (Barratt et al., 2020; Cameron, 2022; Perry, 2020). While Katz’s (2004) framework has provided a conceptual tool in expanding the empirical fields of labour agency and analysing how workers engage with and navigate structural constraints, these studies mostly focused on agency expressions in the workplace rather than in the domain of migration regimes (see Sun et al., 2025 for a notable exception). This thesis thus uses this framework to explain how migrant platform workers in Australia and China express labour agency through resilience, reworking and resistance, shaped by the labour migration regimes in distinctive ways.

3.5 Temporal dimensions of migrant worker agency

While labour agency has received growing research attention in recent years, its temporal dimensions remain underexplored (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Recognising this limitation, a

growing body of literature has started to examine how workers' envisioned futures, the temporality of gains, the transitional nature of legal status influence workers' choices and practices to cope with or challenge precarious work arrangements (Axelsson et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2025; Triandafyllidou, 2022; Weidenstedt et al., 2024). This section reviews three key aspects of temporality in labour agency.

Labour agency is inherently temporal, shaped by workers' past experiences, present constraints and anticipated futures (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). In the context of migrant labour, this temporal orientation remains central to how workers assess risks and opportunities, plan their trajectories and act strategically. For instance, Anderson (2010c) showed how migrant workers often plan movements and make employment decisions around anticipated future opportunities. Zampoukos et al. (2018) similarly emphasised that migrant workers' mobility agency today is often shaped by the spatiotemporal dimensions of the past, present and futures. Axelsson et al. (2017) more specifically found that Chinese chefs in Sweden endure long hours, exploitative conditions and extended periods of uncertainty in anticipation of getting permanent residency or citizenship in the country (i.e. 'imagined futures'), highlighting how future-oriented considerations are embedded in their agency practices.

A second dimension of temporality in labour agency relates to the temporality of gains, which refers to the expected time frame within which workers can benefit from their actions (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). For short-term migrants with time-bounded legal or employment status (e.g., seasonal migrants, international students), long-term improvements, such as union-led reforms or policy change, are often of no interest as the benefits will only materialise after the migrants have left (Strauss & McGrath, 2017; Sun et al., 2025). Instead, their agency tends to focus on securing immediate or short-term advantages, such as higher daily earnings or informal

support mechanisms (Sun et al., 2025). In such cases, labour agency is characterised by pragmatic calculations that weigh the temporality of gains against the perceived length of their stay or employment. As Berntsen (2016) observes, in the context of temporariness, migrant workers are more likely to adopt coping mechanisms that stabilise their current situation rather than commit to collective efforts aimed at long-term transformation.

The third temporal dimension of migrant labour agency relates to the intersections between temporal constraints embedded in labour migration regimes and workers' broader migration trajectories (Griffiths et al., 2013; Robertson, 2019). The concepts of *liminal precarity* (van Doorn, 2023) and *liminal agency* (Weidenstedt et al., 2024) capture how temporariness and uncertainty in migrants' legal and employment status can be both sources of vulnerability and opportunities for tactical manoeuvre and advancement. Liminal precarity describes the transient yet profound vulnerabilities migrant platform workers face when caught between transitional status, highlighting the temporal instability embedded in their work-migration trajectory (Robertson, 2019; van Doorn, 2023). Liminal agency, in contrast, shows how workers exploit this transitional state to build financial capital, acquire work-related skills and knowledge, and work towards more secure futures through migration pathways. This exemplifies how migrant workers use the transitional nature of their legal or employment status as a tactical space to reposition themselves and navigate structural barriers in the labour market or in their migration trajectories (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014; Triandafyllidou, 2022; Weidenstedt et al., 2024).

There remains, however, limited understanding of how institutional structures, particularly labour migration regimes, interact with workers' temporal horizons to shape migrant workers' agency practices (see Sun et al., 2025 as a notable exception). To address this gap, this

study investigates how international labour migration regimes in Australia and internal labour migration regimes in China shape migrant workers' temporal horizons, and how these horizons, such as whether they anticipate staying short or long-term, shape their willingness to act and their expressions of resilience, reworking and resistance.

3.6 Agency of migrant platform workers

This section moves from general literature on migrant worker agency to consider the literature on agency of migrant platform workers, which is the specific empirical focus of this thesis.

Migrant platform workers are positioned at the nexus of precarious employment and migrant status, experiencing dual vulnerability stemming from both their employment and migrant status (Riordan et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2025; Sun & Zhao, 2024). While much of the existing research on these workers has focused on their vulnerabilities and precarious work experiences (Abkhezr & Tang, 2023; Altenried, 2024; Chen et al., 2022; Tandon & Rathi, 2024), a growing body of literature has begun to shift focus towards their agency. Rather than viewing these workers as passive recipients of structural constraints, recent studies found that migrant platform workers actively manage, navigate and at times contest – whether in individual or collective forms – the constraints imposed by platform work and restrictive labour migration regimes (Alyanak et al., 2023; Hau & Savage, 2023; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024). At the individual level, workers often engage in subtle, informal, everyday acts of resistance, such as selectively accepting tasks, manipulating personal data, or strategically logging off to cope with, or resist against platform labour control (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Barratt et al., 2020; Iazzolino & Varesio, 2023). In contrast, collective agency involves building solidarity and coordinating efforts to improve shared conditions (López et al., 2025; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Such

efforts are often organised through co-ethnic social networks and social media communities, which facilitate information sharing and mutual support (Lei, 2021; Ray, 2024). While these acts may not always develop into formal organising, they illustrate how collective consciousness and shared identity among migrant platform workers play a role in coordinating acts of resistance or mutual aid.

While collective agency is often constrained in platform work due to its individualising and algorithmic nature, it is not inherently contradictory. Previous studies have documented often invisible and quiet forms of solidarity and cooperation among platform workers, such as sharing accounts, exchanging tactics for gaming the system, or passing on orders to peer riders, reflecting an orientation towards mutual aid and survival (Bonhomme et al, 2025; Huang 2025; Iazzolino & Varesio; 2023). Moreover, despite the segmented and atomised nature of platform workers, instances of solidarity and more formal collective organising such as strikes, coordinated logouts, and even protests supported by unions have emerged in some national contexts, particularly where legal protections and institutional support of migrant platform workers are more accessible (Alyanak et al., 2023; Hau & Savage, 2023; Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2024; Però & Downey, 2024). Such actions reflect a form of agency that transcends individual form of navigation, highlighting the potential for solidarity even in fragmented platform work environments (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). In this thesis, however, evidence of collective agency was limited, and this absence is further examined in Chapter 8 in light of labour migration regime restrictions.

Scholars have increasingly drawn on Katz's (2004) framework of agency to analyse the diverse forms of agency among platform workers. Many observed coping and survival practices, such as multi-apping, gaming the algorithms and forming informal social networks, have been

classified as forms of resilience or reworking to improve their working conditions without directly challenging the platform structures (Bonhomme et al., 2025; Popan, 2024; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). While these adaptive practices represent workers' resilience in navigating platform work, Bonhomme et al. (2025) caution that some acts of resilience, such as enduring long hours and algorithmic control, may in fact reflect constrained choices shaped by migrant workers' precarious legal status. In this context, what appears as agency may be driven by the fear of deportation or lack of viable alternatives, rather than autonomous decision-making. This implies that platform workers' legal and institutional status, shaped by labour migration regimes, need to be considered in analysing how agency manifests in platform work.

The category of resistance, however, has been interpreted and operationalised differently across the literature. Some platform work studies limit resistance to acts underpinned by oppositional consciousness and collective mobilisation, oriented towards structural transformation such as public protests, unionisation, or legal campaigns (Alyanak et al., 2023; López et al., 2024; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Other studies have drawn upon Scott's (1990) concept of '*hidden transcripts*' and Katz's (2004) framework of agency to broaden the interpretation and conceptualise resistance as more subtle, covert, and individually enacted 'everyday resistance'. These forms of everyday resistance include tactical rule-bending, misbehaviours, or counterproductive practices (e.g., reject orders, software plug-ins, ignore route planning) that disrupt algorithmic system or delivery work process, challenge platform governance, or circumvent exploitative conditions without engaging in open confrontation (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Bonhomme et al., 2024; Huang, 2025; Yu et al., 2022).

The form and visibility of resistance is shaped by institutional and migration contexts. More visible and overt form of resistance such as strikes or worker-led organised activities are

more commonly observed in democratic welfare states where platform workers get more institutional support and have access to social protections or collective bargaining institutions. In countries such as Denmark, Germany, Greece and the UK, for example, there have been instances of visible open confrontation and coordinated mobilisation among migrant platform workers (e.g., strikes, protests, grassroots movements, formed work councils) (Avagianou et al., 2024; Hau & Savage, 2023; López et al., 2024; Però & Downey, 2024;). By contrast, in countries with different governance arrangements, such as China, or among precarious migrants in liberal market economies, such as Australia, acts of resistance are often subtle and decentralised, operating ‘under the radar’ through informal peer support, or acts of non-compliance (Barratt et al., 2020; Lei, 2021; Liu & Friedman, 2021). For migrants with insecure legal status or limited labour protections, they tend to avoid overt confrontation due to the risk of deportation or platform deactivation, opting instead for ‘soft resistance’ or everyday forms of resistance, such as working under borrowed or pirate accounts, selectively rejecting orders, or covertly bypassing platform rules to reassert control over their working conditions (Alyanak et al., 2023; Bonhomme et al., 2025). These patterns highlight the importance of developing a context-sensitive understanding of resistance – one that situates workers’ agency within the constraints and opportunities of specific institutional and migratory environments.

Recent studies have shown that the boundaries between these categories are often blurred. Acts categorised as resilience or reworking may also contain elements of subtle resistance, or evolve into more coordinated or confrontational acts over time, and therefore the meanings attached to particular practices can shift depending on the social and institutional contexts (Bonhomme et al., 2025; Popan, 2024).

Therefore, this thesis adopts a spectrum-based understanding of resistance, which encompasses both overt, organised activities and covert, individualised acts of disobedience or subversion. Rather than restricting resistance to collective mobilisation aimed at systemic transformation, it recognises that migrant platform workers may also resist through tactical, everyday acts that defy rules, challenge exploitative conditions, disrupt control mechanisms, or push back against institutional constraints. While these acts may not explicitly aim to overturn power structures, they nonetheless reflect an oppositional stance, with which migrant platform workers refuse to passively accept the regulatory regimes imposed on them. Importantly, such forms of resistance also apply to the migration domain, where migrant workers defy the restrictions of labour migration regimes, thus resisting the migration rules that regulate their rights and mobility.

While existing literature explores a wide range of agency expressions of migrant platform workers and recognises that their agency is shaped by structural conditions, including platform architectures (Altenried, 2024; Anwar & Graham, 2020), migration rules (Alyanak et al., 2023; Zhou, 2022), and workers' legal status (Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2024; van Doorn et al., 2023), these factors are often treated as part of the broader context of workers' vulnerability rather than as central forces shaping the forms and meanings of agency. As such, there has been limited understanding on how labour migration regimes, including migration rules and regulatory frameworks on migrant workers, shape workers' choices and practices in the host labour market. This thesis addresses this gap by foregrounding workers' migrant status to investigate how different labour migration regimes interact with workers' temporal outlooks to shape their agency expressions. Specifically, it investigates why some agency practices are more prevalent or viable in a certain national context rather than another. This study also addresses the gap by

extending the scope of labour agency beyond workplace itself, exploring how these platform workers exert agency in migration life domains and how they navigate migration-related constraints and opportunities to improve their marginalised and precarious positions.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has set out the theoretical foundation for examining migrant platform workers' agency in this thesis. It traced the evolving conceptualisation of labour agency and the broadening field from labour geography to employment relations, sociology and migration studies, highlighting the increasing emphasis on workers' individual and unorganised agency practices against structural constraints, and the shifting focus towards marginalised groups of workers such as informal workers and migrant workers. It situated the discussion on labour agency within the broader structure–agency debate in migration studies, arguing that meso-level labour migration regimes and social relations are critical in exploring migrant workers' agency expressions. These regimes condition workers' access to rights, mobility and protections in ways that shape what forms of agency are viable or meaningful to them.

Katz's (2004) agency framework was introduced as a conceptual tool to examine migrant workers' everyday tactics and strategies. While the framework has been widely adopted in different fields of studies to explore agency expressions of different actors, this review showed that its applications remain relatively underdeveloped in migration studies. Much of the literature focuses on how workers are constrained by migration structures and treats migrant status as a general background factor rather than as a structuring force both enables and constrains workers' specific agency practices.

This chapter also reviewed a growing body of scholarship that identifies individualised and collective forms of agency among migrant platform workers shaped by platform architectures, migration structures and social networks. It then identified the gap concerning how existing studies have focused on agency vis-à-vis the labour process, but paid limited attention to how workers navigate migration-related constraints and how workers act to improve not just their working conditions but also their precarious migrant status. The next chapter turns to the methodology adopted in this thesis to address the gaps identified and answer the research question.

CHAPTER 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework designed to examine how labour migration regimes shape the agency expressions of migrant food-delivery workers in Australia and China. It provides a detailed account of the study's comparative qualitative case study design, data collection procedures, analytical strategies and ethical considerations. Section 4.2 discusses the rationale for using a comparative case study approach, including the use of a most-different systems design to explore differences in institutional and regulatory settings between the two national contexts. Section 4.3 outlines the multi-site data collection process, including recruitment, sampling and challenges encountered during fieldwork. Section 4.4 details the data analysis strategy, using a six-stage hybrid thematic analysis framework that integrates deductive and inductive logics to examine different expressions of agency of migrant platform workers across both work-related and migration-related domains. This section also explains how cross-case comparative insights were generated with focus on both similar patterns and context-specific forms of agency.

4.2 Research design: qualitative case study

This thesis employs a qualitative, comparative case study design (Yin, 2014) to explore the agency expressions of migrant workers on food-delivery platforms in Australia and China, with a particular focus on how labour migration regimes shape their agency. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it can facilitate close investigation of complex, real-life phenomena such as the interaction between institutional structures and individual agency (Simons, 2009). It also provides the analytical tools to engage with social and cultural processes, especially in capturing

participants' own interpretations of their lived experiences (Myers, 2019). This aligns with an interpretivist epistemology, which prioritises understanding human behaviour, focusing explicitly on 'how' and 'why' certain social phenomena unfold, and how individuals respond to the social context (Bell et al., 2022). This study, rather than measuring attitudes or behaviours at scale, seeks to explore how migrant workers make sense of their experiences, interpret and navigate the structural constraints embedded in labour migration regimes, and how these actions are situated within their broader migration trajectories and institutional contexts. Qualitative research enables a detailed, context-specific analysis, which is particularly appropriate for cross-national comparative studies (Creswell, 2013). It allows for the examination of distinct institutional and regulatory contexts, like those of Australia and China, including their labour migration and platform governance regimes. A qualitative case study approach also enables exploration of micro- and meso-level variations in different contexts, including differences in migrants' temporal horizons, social relationships and migration trajectories. This contributes to a context-rich understanding of agency, what has been termed 'contextualised agency' (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010).

The case study design enables the integration of multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, policy documents and field observations, to understand participants' experiences as migrant platform workers, their perceptions on migration rules, the meaning they assigned to their agency expressions, and the structural context within which they acted. These methods are selected to triangulate evidence, validate findings, and provide comprehensive insights into how migrant workers enacted agency practices in different national contexts (Yin, 2014). Each method is elaborated in greater detail in the subsequent sections on data collection.

4.2.1 Comparative case study design

This study adopts a comparative case study approach grounded in the logic of most-different systems design to examine how structurally distinct labour migration regimes shape agency expressions of migrant workers engaged in food-delivery platform work. Hantrais and Mangen (1996) defined comparative social research as ‘attempts to study particular issues or phenomena in two or more countries with the explicit intention of comparing their manifestation in different socio-cultural settings, using the same research instruments’ (p. 1). By explicitly comparing multiple cases, comparative methods facilitate the systematic identification of patterns, variations, and in particular, relationships between labour migration regimes and migrant platform workers’ agency in this study (Hantrais & Mangen, 1999; Stake, 2005).

This comparative approach is appropriate for analysing cases that differ substantially in institutional contexts but show similarities in outcomes, thereby enabling the identification of shared mechanisms or structural effects (Landman, 2003). In this study, the outcome of interest (i.e., dependent variable) is the similarly constrained and individualised agency enacted by migrant platform workers in both Australia and China. These forms of agency are characterised by limited bargaining power, legal precarity, and small-scale tactical navigation (Barratt et al., 2020; Zhou, 2024). The central explanatory factor (i.e., independent variable) is the institutional configuration of labour migration regimes that restrict migrants’ rights and mobility, access to work and protections, and permanent residency, thereby shaping their overrepresentation in precarious platform work and constraining their agency (Chan, 2014; Clibborn & Wright, 2022). The context chapter investigates how structurally distinct regimes in the two countries may nonetheless produce functionally equivalent constraints on workers’ agency through different mechanisms.

Australia and China can be considered as ‘most-different’ systems based on differences in political economy models and institutional governance structures (outlined in greater detail in Chapter 5). Australia operates as a liberal market democracy with independent trade unions and a migration framework that categorises international migrant workers through temporary visa streams (Boucher & Gest, 2018; Wright, 2012). In contrast, China is an authoritarian, state-capitalist system with state-led unions, constrained collective representation, and institutionalised exclusion of internal migrants via the hukou system (Chen, 2009; Lee, 2019; Yang, 2014). Based on these institutional differences, significant variation in migrant platform workers’ experiences and agency expressions would be expected. However, similar outcomes are observed in both countries that demonstrate migrant food-delivery workers’ constrained, fragmented, and individualised forms of agency (e.g., Barratt et al., 2020; Huang, 2024; Sun et al., 2025; Sun & Chen, 2021). These unexpected similarities in outcomes suggest that the shared structural constraints imposed by labour migration regimes may be a common underlying cause. The use of most-different systems design provides analytical leverage to investigate how different labour migration regimes shape agency through context-specific mechanisms.

Within the broader national cases, the cities of Sydney and Guangzhou were selected as the primary field sites. As major metropolitan cities, both are key hubs for food-delivery platform work and are characterised by exceptionally high concentrations of migrant workers. In the Australian case, government data shows that in 2021, 50% of temporary residents live in Sydney and Melbourne, with Sydney alone accounting for the largest proportion of temporary skilled migrants (38%), international students (34%) and working holiday makers (18%) among all temporary migrants – the latter two visa categories being particularly prominent within the food-delivery workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023b). For the Chinese case,

Guangzhou is one of the country's principal destinations for internal migrants. According to the latest Seventh National Population Census data in 2020, Guangzhou had a registered *hukou* population of 9.36 million, and a floating (non-*hukou*) population of 9.38 million, making migrants the majority of the city's residents (Statistics Bureau of Guangzhou Municipality, 2021). Beyond the demographic pattern of migrants in Sydney and Guangzhou, migrants in both cities face relatively high legal and institutional barriers to settlement, particularly for rural migrants in Guangzhou. As one of the Tier 1 cities,ⁱ Guangzhou implemented a highly regulated and restrictive *hukou* system, making it consistently difficult for rural migrants to access urban rights and welfare, as well as settlement. The scale and intensity of migration in both cities, along with the long-standing exclusion of migrants, provide a rich empirical setting for this comparative study.

At the same time, this study critically adopts the most-different systems design to account for the complexity of causation. Strict adherence to the most-different systems design with an assumption of a single explanatory factor can obscure the multi-causal and interactive processes that characterise social life (Lieberson, 1991). Specifically, migrant workers' agency expressions are not shaped by one single causal factor of labour migration regimes alone, but also by other structural factors, such as platform governance, legal precarity and employment informality (Anderson, 2010a; van Doorn, 2023). Moreover, individual and social characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, social identity and migrant status, or the intersectionality of these characteristics, may also mediate how workers perceive and enact agency, adding complexity to their experiences (Veen et al., 2025b). This study therefore adapts most-different systems design

ⁱ While there is not a single version of classification, according to many media publications, the consensus is that four cities Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen belong to Tier-1, representing the most developed areas of the country.

by examining both how different labour migration regimes generate similar constraints on workers' agency and how the migration regimes interact with other structural conditions in shaping labour agency.

4.2.2 Contextualised comparison and 'slow' comparison approach

In applying the most-different systems design, this study integrates a *contextualised comparison* approach (Locke & Thelen, 1995). Rather than assuming that similar outcomes across cases reflect identical mechanisms, contextualised comparisons emphasise how shared patterns emerge through different institutional pathways. Informed by this approach, this study investigates how migrant workers' constrained agency, observed in both Australia and China, manifests differently through distinct mechanisms shaped by each country's unique legal and migration infrastructures. For instance, while workers' endurance of precarious working conditions is a common form of resilience in both cases, the migration framework and workers' temporal horizons underpinning it in Australia differ from that of workers in China. These contextual mediations are not treated as background 'noise', but as integral to understanding how similar conditions are refracted through different institutional settings. Thus, the research avoids oversimplification of seemingly similar outcomes on constrained agency by investigating the nuanced differences in each form of agency (e.g., resilience, reworking and resistance), ensuring a robust, theoretically informed explanation of variation within their agency expressions (Locke & Thelen, 1995).

This study also adopts a *slow comparative method* (Almond & Connolly, 2020), which advocates deep, iterative engagement with each national case. In line with this, the research design incorporates policy analysis of Australia's international migration system and China's

hukou system, tracing historical developments and recent transformations as detailed in Chapter 5. Beyond formal interviews, the study engages with informal observations at digital and physical field sites, such as online food-delivery worker forums and off-line logistics stations, to capture contextual data on workers' daily navigation of precarity (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2014).

Methodological flexibility was maintained throughout, with interview questions evolving in response to early-stage fieldwork findings and document analysis (Almond & Connolly, 2020). For example, insights into how workers' visa restrictions shaped their navigation of platform governance and migration rules in Australia led to more targeted investigation of *hukou*-related constraints in China. Aligned with Almond and Connolly's (2019) notion of 'federal projects', each national case maintains local specificity, addressing distinct labour migration regimes and associated institutional constraints such as visa-based restrictions in Australia and *hukou*-based exclusion in China, underpinned by an overarching theoretical framework of labour agency (i.e. meta-comparability) (Katz, 2004). Accordingly, the thesis reports the Australian and Chinese cases as distinct yet interlinked chapters, with comparative synthesis developed in the subsequent discussion chapter. In sum, the integration of contextualised comparison and slow comparative approaches ensures that the study captures both the specificity of labour migration regimes in each national context, the broader similar patterns and nuanced differences of migrant platform workers' agency expressions.

4.3 Data collection

In data collection process, this study incorporated a carefully designed sampling strategy, collected primary data through interviews and secondary data from policy and document

analysis. A comparative qualitative case study approach was implemented across the two national contexts of Australia and China, ensuring that data collection methods were consistent and allowed for meaningful cross-country comparison. All procedures were assessed and approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol number 2022/407) on 5 July 2022. The following sections detail the sampling strategy, the conduction of semi-structured interviews, and the use of secondary sources for contextualisation and triangulation.

4.3.1 Recruitment strategy

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy guided by clear inclusion criteria to recruit participants who could offer rich, experience-based insights into migrant platform workers' agency expressions. Purposive sampling was adopted because of the study's qualitative design and small sample size, which prioritised depth over representativeness (Campbell et al., 2020; Tongco, 2007). In particular, participants were eligible if they: (1) were migrants (international temporary migrants in Australia, rural-to-urban migrants in China); (2) were currently or recently engaged in app-based food delivery work in the past 12 months; and (3) held a temporary or non-local residency status (i.e., temporary visa holders in Australia or non-*hukou* residents in Guangzhou, China). Applying these criteria in the recruitment process helped ensure a diverse but relevant sample, improving the study's credibility and transferability (Campbell et al., 2020). Acknowledging the problem of non-representativeness and the potential for selection bias in this

process, the clearly articulated selection criteria and transparency mitigated the limitations of purposive sampling (Agadjanian & Zotova, 2012).

To maximise reach and recruit an adequate number of participants, a multi-channel recruitment strategy was implemented (Creswell, 2013). It combined street intercepts, online recruitment and snowball sampling, each of which was adapted to accommodate the unique national contexts and sensitivity of prospective participants.

Street intercepts were the primary recruitment method, conducted in locations where food-delivery workers congregate, such as shopping malls, popular restaurants, and city centre waiting areas in both Sydney and Guangzhou. Potential participants were randomly selected and approached through initially an informal conversation, in which the purpose and objective of the study was explained, followed by asking their willingness to participate, verifying eligibility as migrant workers and collecting contact information for interviews. This approach facilitated direct engagement in couriers' work environments, enabling informal observations of their work behaviours and patterns. Following existing practices in platform work research (Goods et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2025), this approach aligns with the nature of food-delivery work because workers lack a fixed workplace where recruitment could otherwise take place. In this study, street intercepts were conducted across different times and locations in Sydney and Guangzhou to facilitate the diversity of participants (e.g., full-time vs. part-time workers). That is, this study included food-delivery workers with different work patterns and employment dependency levels, and therefore it captured differences in how migrants' economic reliance on platform work intersected with their legal status and agency practices. Nonetheless, the street intercept method posed some practical challenges. Many food-delivery workers were unable to pause their work due to time constraints, resulting in limited engagement at the time of approaching them. To

address this, informational flyers (Appendix A) were created and distributed to prospective participants, allowing them to review the study outline and participation criteria, and to contact the researcher at their convenience.

The second recruitment approach was online recruitment. It complemented the intercept method by targeting platform worker communities on social media. Informational flyers were shared in relevant online communities and forums, including food-delivery workers' Facebook groups in Australia and RedNote groups in China. This approach expanded geographic reach and improved access to less visible groups of the workforce (Weslowski, 2014).

Lastly, participants were also recruited by snowball sampling, accessing participants through chain-referrals from existing informants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). After completing interviews, participants were asked if they knew other workers who met the criteria and might be interested in participating. This technique was particularly useful for accessing a hard-to-reach research population, such as migrant workers on food-delivery platforms who do not have fixed workplaces, and are potentially in violation of platform rules and/or migration rules (Agadjanian & Zotova, 2012; Sadler et al., 2010). While the snowball sampling strategy carries the risk of non-probability bias and recruits mostly participants who had closely engaged with co-ethnic networks or communities, this bias was mitigated by explicitly encouraging referrals of individuals with diverse backgrounds (e.g., different visa types or ages) and by complementing this method with another two recruitment strategies outlined above (Bernard, 2017; Tongco, 2007). The engagement with co-ethnic networks itself is also a meaningful expression of agency, which can offer valuable insights into the analysis of migrants' agency practices. This strategy was especially effective in China, where trust and familiarity among social networks often play a key role in recruitment. In one case, three workers were recruited through a well-connected

participant, highlighting the value of referrals in accessing hard-to-reach migrant worker communities.

Recruitment outcomes were tracked in a research logbook, enabling reflection and strategic adjustment throughout the process. In Australia, 81 riders were approached, resulting in 38 initial agreements, with 6 later non-responsive and 2 withdrawing, for 30 in total. In China, 124 riders were approached, resulting in 36 initial agreements, 5 later non-responsive, and 1 withdrawing, for 30 in total. Recruitment difficulties in China were exacerbated by the industry's competitive, time-pressured nature and cultural hesitation toward unfamiliar research requests (Gallagher-Thompson et al., 2006; Sun, 2019). To overcome these barriers, the researcher adopted a more immersive approach, spending extended time in rider-dense areas or logistics service stations and starting by informal chats to establish familiarity and trust before formally asking for their willingness for participation.

4.3.2 Participant demographics

Using the outlined multi-tiered recruitment strategy, the study recruited a total of 60 participants, with 30 in each country. Participant demographics for each case are summarised in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 respectively.

In Australia, 26 participants were male and 4 were female, reflecting the gendered nature of on-demand platform work. Fourteen relied on platform work as their sole income source, while 16 used it for supplementary income. The participants worked via multiple platforms, including Uber Eats (22), Hungry Panda (15), Menulog (4), DoorDash (3) and Fantuan (2), which exposed them to different platform governance regimes. Participants came from diverse national backgrounds, with the largest group originating from China (18), and others from Brazil,

Colombia, France, Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Vietnam, and the Philippines. All participants were visa-holding (i.e., documented) migrants – 25 held a Student visa (Subclass 500), 1 held a Working Holiday visa (Subclass 417), and 4 held a Bridging visa. The predominance of Chinese-origin workers in the Australian case reflects broader demographic characteristics and trends in Australia’s immigration programs. At the end of June 2023, over 655,000 Chinese-born individuals were living in Australia, making them the third-largest migrant community (Department of Home Affairs, n.d.). Additionally, China has consistently ranked as the top source country for Australia’s student visa program, accounting for around 24% of the student visas granted in the 2024-2025 program year (Department of Home Affairs, 2025b). This study’s participant profile aligns closely with this demographic pattern in that of the 18 Chinese-origin interviewees, 15 were on student visas at the time of interviews.

In China, all 30 participants were male, broadly consistent with national gendered trends in the delivery platform work sector (Choi, 2018). Financial dependence varied among these participants, with the majority (26) being fully dependent on platform work, while four supplemented it with other forms of income. Workers were engaged on either Meituan (13) or Ele.me (17), the two dominant food-delivery platforms in China. Among the participants, 20 riders were employed under the *zhongbao* (crowdsourced) model, while the remaining 10 worked as *zhuansong* (outsourced) couriers at the time of interviews. The two different work arrangements will be further unpacked in context and findings chapters. Participants were all rural-to-urban migrants, with their rural *hukou* origins spanning Guangdong (14), Hunan, Guangxi, Henan, Yunnan, Jiangxi, Fujian, and Guizhou. Most of them (28 out of 30) were living in Guangzhou without holding local urban *hukou*, while the remaining two had successfully transferred their *hukou* to Guangzhou following their migration from rural areas.

Table 4.1: Demographic characteristics of interviewees in Australia

Characteristics	N = 30
Gender	
Male	26
Female	4
Country of origin	
Brazil	2
China	18
Columbia	1
France	1
Indonesia	1
Malaysia	2
The Philippines	1
Turkey	2
Vietnam	2
Visa types	
Student visa (subclass 500)	25
Working Holiday visa (subclass 417)	1
Bridging visa A (BVA)	4
Financial dependence	
Fully dependent	14
Partially dependent	16
Platform used	
Uber Eats	22
Hungry Panda	15
Menulog	4
DoorDash	3
Fantuan	2

Table 4.2: Demographic characteristics of interviewees in China

Characteristics	N = 30
Gender	
Male	30
Female	0
Hukou status	
Local Guangzhou <i>hukou</i>	2
Non-local Guangzhou <i>hukou</i>	28
Rural hukou registration	
Fujian	1
Guangdong	14
Guangxi	2
Guizhou	2
Henan	2
Hunan	6
Jiangxi	2
Yunnan	1
Financial dependence	
Fully dependent	26
Partially dependent	4
Platform used	
Meituan	13
Ele.me	17
Work mode	
<i>Zhuansong</i> (outsourced)	10
<i>Zhongbao</i> (crowdsourced)	20

4.3.3 Primary data collection through interview

The primary source of empirical data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with migrant platform workers in Australia and China. The interview questions were designed in align with the research objectives and were informed by migration policy analysis and relevant literature. Key themes included participants' migration motivations and trajectories, temporality of their stay, work experiences (e.g., work conditions, order scheduling, interactions with platforms), understandings of migration policies, and strategies employed to navigate platform rules, labour migration regimes and institutional constraints (see Appendix B).

A total of 60 interviews were conducted, with 30 interviews in each country, until theoretical saturation was achieved. That is, additional interviews no longer generated new insights and a diversity of perspectives had been captured (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the appropriate method for several reasons. This format enabled participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while allowing emergent themes and perspectives to be probed. Given the study's focus on agency expressions, which centre around how migrants interpret and navigate structural constraints, this method was well-suited to uncover the motivations, rationales and decision-making processes underlying worker behaviour (Gioia et al., 2013; Myers, 2019). Semi-structured interviews also offered practical advantages when working with a highly mobile and time-constrained population, and in this case, food-delivery workers. The method's flexibility in terms of location, scheduling, and format (in-person or virtual) facilitated access to participants whose availability was often unpredictable. Moreover, the open-ended structure allowed the interviews to adapt to each participant's personal background, work experience and migration trajectory, thus capturing more nuanced

understandings of how agency is exercised in different contexts and shaped by different individual circumstances.

Following a few initial interviews in each country, transcripts were reviewed, and the questions were refined to accommodate emergent themes. In Australia, for instance, early interviews revealed that some participants strategically chose to switch from a student visa to a bridging visa in order to extend their stay and working rights or circumvent work hour restrictions. In response, a set of follow-up questions was added to explore the rationale behind this visa pathway and its implications for employment and mobility, including *'Have you used or considered using a Bridging Visa?'*, *'Why did you decide (not) to use this visa?'* and *'Have you come across any problems particularly with your visa type in job finding?'*. This enabled a deeper investigation of the emerging themes about migrants' stay in the host labour market, and how these choices shaped workers' experiences. Similarly, early interviews in both countries revealed that workers' attitudes towards migration and their future prospects varied across different ages and life stages, leading to new questions set up to explore participants' temporal horizons on their engagement in platform work, and their stay within the host country or city. Questions such as *'How long do you plan to work in this sector?'* and *'What are your future aspirations in terms of your life here?'* were added to better understand how these influenced workers' agency practices. These iterative refinements, made in response to the data as it unfolded, ensured that the interviews remained responsive and analytically generative (Galletta & Cross, 2013; Gioia et al., 2013)

Interview process

Of the 60 total interviews, 30 were conducted in Australia between October 2022 and January 2023, and 30 in China between April and June 2023. Interviews lasted between 30 and 80 minutes, depending on the participants' availability. In Australia, 16 interviews were conducted face-to-face and 18 online (including 4 follow-up calls). In China, 10 interviews were conducted in person and 27 online (including 7 follow-up calls). One special case was an interview conducted through messages on WeChat with a deaf worker, who actively volunteered to participate. Before the interviews began, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and their right to confidentiality. The participant information statement and participant consent forms were provided to them prior to interviews (see Appendix C and D). All interviews were audio-recorded with permission, with consent obtaining orally for online or phone interviews, or in written form when the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Participants were offered to conduct interviews in either English or Mandarin (the researcher is bilingual), depending on their preference. All interviews in China were conducted in Mandarin, while in Australia, 20 were conducted in Mandarin and 10 in English. This language flexibility both enhanced communication and helped participants explain and articulate complex issues more freely.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Initial transcriptions were generated using an automatic transcription function in the digital voice recorder and were subsequently reviewed and corrected manually to ensure accuracy. Depending on the audio quality, it took between 60 and 160 minutes to transcribe and verify each interview. Of the 60 interviews, 50 were conducted in Mandarin and translated into English to ensure consistency in the language of analysis. This enabled a unified coding process across both the Australian and Chinese datasets.

To ensure the accuracy and credibility of participants' discourse, clarifying and paraphrasing questions were frequently used to verify the participants' responses during the interviews. Notes were taken using Microsoft Word, with key points highlighted to help the identification of emerging themes at early stage. Following each interview, a summary memo was drafted that captured the participant's key demographic characteristics, motivations for entering food-delivery work, length of residence in the host country or city, current migrant or *hukou* status, and future aspirations. These memos provided an overview of each participant, serving as an integral part of the audit trail for data analysis.

Several challenges were encountered during the interviews. First, establishing rapport was particularly important when discussing topics such as visa non-compliance or rule-bending behaviours. Participants were often hesitant to speak candidly about such issues, especially early in the interview. To address this, interviews began with simple and neutral questions about participants' work routines, reasons for joining the platform and general experiences of the food-delivery work. Sensitive issues were introduced only after trust had been established. Reinforcing the confidentiality of the data and the academic independence from government or platform organisations also enabled participants to feel more secure. In a few cases, however, interviewees chose not to answer specific questions or gave only brief responses on certain topics. These boundaries were respected by moving on to other questions.

Second, the intensity and unpredictability of food-delivery work created a persistent challenge throughout the data collection process. In China, for instance, some interviews were abruptly cut short by incoming delivery orders and had to be rescheduled multiple times. In one case, a participant ended the interview midway, saying, "If I don't grab this one now, I probably won't get many orders for another half hour". Such a challenge reflected the structural pressures

shaping the everyday working lives of platform workers. A flexible interview schedule was maintained (e.g. being available evenings or weekends and rescheduling as needed) and a few shorter interviews were conducted that were later supplemented with follow-up phone calls.

Insights were also generated informally, outside of the recorded interviews. In China, extended periods were spent in public areas where riders congregated between orders during the research process. These informal observations allowed for deeper contextual understanding. For example, a group of workers discussed in frustration how difficult it was to get *hukou* in Guangzhou, with one muttering, “It’s not meant for people like us”. Such anecdotes provided glimpses into this group of workers’ aspirations and institutional exclusion, complementing the formal data.

These layered data collection strategies and reflexive adaptations across both formal and informal settings contributed to a rich, contextualised understanding of migrant workers’ experiences, enabling this study’s exploration of migrants’ legal precarity, institutional constraints of labour migration regimes and their agency expressions within the constraints.

Ethical considerations

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the interviews, particularly regarding interviewees’ migrant status, precarious employment, and instances of rule-bending or non-compliance behaviours, careful attention was paid to safeguarding participants’ confidentiality and minimising risks associated with their migrant status.

All participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews. They were also explicitly informed that they could skip any questions or withdraw from the interview at any point without consequence. To protect anonymity,

participants were free to use nicknames, and a customised alphanumeric code based on non-identifiable personal information was created for each participant in the transcripts and notes. All identifiable information was immediately de-identified following transcription and removed from the data management system. Moreover, interview recordings, transcripts, and coding files were stored in a password-protected folder within the University of Sydney's secure Dropbox environment, accessible only to the student researcher and supervisory team.

In instances where interviewees shared sensitive accounts, such as visa rule irregularities, or actions that could be viewed as breaking or bending platform and immigration rules, ethical care was taken to ensure participants felt comfortable with disclosing the issue. Boundaries were respected when participants chose not to elaborate further. In this case, potential psychological and legal risks could be minimised while still enabling a meaningful exploration of migrants' agency behaviours.

4.3.4 Secondary data collection from document analysis

In addition to interviews, this study drew on a wide range of documents to understand the institutional contexts that shape migrant platform workers' experiences in Australia and China. Document analysis served two key purposes. First, it provided complementary insights into the regulatory and organisational structures that shape migrant platform workers' conditions, mobility and agency practices. Second, it enabled triangulation and contextualisation of the interview data (Bowen, 2009). This was an iterative process that began prior to the fieldwork and continued throughout the data analysis and writing phases. Two main streams of documents were examined: platform-related materials that reveal how platforms manage, monitor and incentivise workers; and national policies regulating platform work and labour migration, including visa and

hukou regimes respectively. These sources offered complementary insights into the interpretation of institutional constraints and agency practices reported by participants.

Platform governance documents

Publicly available documents from major food-delivery platforms, including terms and conditions for delivery workers, settings of rating and bonus systems, onboarding requirements, platform-published corporate reports were reviewed. In Australia, this included a report commissioned by the Victorian government on digital platform work titled as ‘Digital Platform Work in Australia’ (McDonald et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2025), key policy documents guiding food-delivery platform practices including ‘Hungry Panda Independent Contractor Declaration’, Uber Eats’ ‘Delivery Partner Agreement (Australia)’, and relevant ‘frequently asked questions’ webpages of platforms such as Uber Eats, Fantuan, and Hungry Panda. These documents revealed how platforms define the scope of worker responsibilities, set the conditions of their work and performance, and the legal framing of employment relationships, which often operate under independent contractor arrangements. In China, direct access to internal platform contracts was limited, reflecting public concerns over platform work transparency. However, supplementary materials such as Meituan’s ‘Corporate Social Responsibility Report’ (Meituan Research Institute, 2018) and the International Labor Organisation’s report on Digital Labour Platforms and Labour Protection in China (Zhou, 2020) were reviewed to understand how these platforms define workers as self-employed or independent contractors and publicly frame their minimal commitments to worker welfare entitlements.

For both case studies, government and industry reports underscored the overrepresentation of migrant workers in the food-delivery sector, further substantiating this

study's analytical focus on migrant platform labour and their precarity. Discussions with workers also facilitated access to key internal documents not available publicly, such as 'Rider Services Agreements' and 'Freight Income Settlement' sheets signed by them, which outlined platform-specific incentive and penalty structures. These documents substantiated participants' accounts of performance-based bonus and penalty systems, and the algorithmic management they are subjected to, facilitating a contextual understanding of their navigation of platform work organisation.

Labour migration regimes and platform regulation

The second stream of document analysis focused on the legal and institutional frameworks that shape the rights, entitlements and constraints confronted by migrant platform workers. In Australia, this included migration policies, particularly temporary visa streams and pathways to permanent residency, and legal cases of platform workers' legal classification by the Fair Work Commission (FWC). These documents showed how the independent contracting model enabled platforms to circumvent standard employment protections, while migration policy imposed temporal and conditional constraints on migrants' work rights. In China, the analysis focused on *hukou*-related policies, social security regulations, *hukou* conversion criteria in Guangzhou, and evolving government guidelines on platform labour. Key documents included the 'Guiding Opinions on Protecting the Rights and Interests of Workers in New Forms of Employment' (State Council, 2021), which was the first national directive addressing the rights and protections of platform workers. Municipal-level *hukou* policies were reviewed to verify participants' accounts of being ineligible for subsidised housing, public education for children and urban medical coverage without local *hukou*. These policy documents provided deeper understanding

of the stratified citizenship system that shaped rural-to-urban migrants' marginalised status in the Chinese context.

Document analysis was closely interwoven with the interview process. As participants mentioned certain rules, relevant policies and platform materials were cross-checked to clarify discrepancies and corroborate worker narratives. For instance, after several interviewees in Australia explained how they leveraged bridging visas to circumvent student visa restrictions, the researcher examined migration policies on this often neglected visa stream and platforms' contractor agreements to assess the validity and implications of this workaround. Similarly, in China, workers described how their non-local *hukou* status limited their access to healthcare and public schools, which were substantiated through municipal *hukou* regulations of Guangzhou. In cases where there were discrepancies between official policies and workers' experiences or interpretations, those gaps became findings in themselves implying, for example, lack of awareness of rights, informal practices or implementations diverging from formal written policy, or rule-bending behaviours.

Incorporating multiple sources of documentary evidence enhanced the contextual depth and analytical rigour of the study's findings. Document analysis complemented the interview data by providing an institutional lens on how migrant platform workers are governed and positioned within national labour markets. This multi-source triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2014) strengthened the credibility of the analysis and enabled a richer understanding of how institutional contexts shape workers' agency.

4.4 Data analysis

Qualitative data collected from interviews was analysed through thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), which involves ‘a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon...where merging themes become the categories for analysis’ (p. 82). Under thematic analysis, this study adopted a hybrid thematic analysis framework that combined inductive and deductive approaches (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), enabling the researcher to develop themes from both the theoretical framework and the empirical data. This section outlines the analytical framework guiding the analysis, the step-by-step process undertaken (from transcription to coding to theme development), and the measures implemented to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings. The use of qualitative data software (NVivo) helped manage the large volume of data and maintain a clear audit trail of coding and theme development.

4.4.1 Analytical framework

The analysis drew on a hybrid thematic analysis framework adapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), which integrates both theory-driven (deductive) and data-driven (inductive) methods. This approach is especially well-suited to qualitative research where pre-existing conceptual frameworks guide initial coding but flexibility is maintained to allow unexpected patterns and insights to emerge from the data (Proudfoot, 2023). In this study, the deductive codes were developed from the conceptual lens of Katz’s (2004) labour agency framework, and inductive codes emerged from detailed reading and analysis of participants’ narratives.

The six stages of such a hybrid process proposed by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) are outlined in Table 4.3 below. While presented as a step-by-step procedure, the hybrid analysis

was conducted iteratively and reflexively, which is particularly useful in this cross-case comparative research. This method thus offered the flexibility to trace both context-specific and similar patterns in the data and compare agency practices across two national contexts (Australia and China).

Table 4.3: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding adapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006)

A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding	
Stage	Description
1. Developing the code manual	Create a code manual with broad codes based on the theoretical framework and research questions. Define each code with specific criteria for identification in the data.
2. Testing the reliability of the code	Determine the applicability of the predefined codes through test pieces by doing coding and having another researcher apply the codes to ensure consistency
3. Summarising data and identifying initial themes	Paraphrase data by “reading, listening to and summarizing the raw data” (p. 86); outline “the key points made by participants” to help identify patterns or themes emerged.
4. Applying template of codes and additional coding	Apply the predefined codes from the code manual to the data (enter into NVivo as nodes), while also modify the manual by adding new codes or refining existing ones when new pattern emerge.
5. Connecting the codes and identifying themes	Analyse the connections between codes to identify themes and patterns that are relevant to the research question; identify both similarities and differences within patterns.

6. Corroborating and legitimating coded themes	Review the themes to ensure they accurately represent the data, supporting the findings with direct quotes and ensuring interpretations are consistent with the data collected.
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4.4.2 Data coding

All interview transcripts, together with the interview notes and memos, were uploaded into NVivo for systematic analysis. The formal coding process began in July 2023 and continued until July 2024, following the hybrid inductive–deductive thematic analysis framework developed by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). This process was inherently abductive, iteratively shaped by both theory and emerging empirical insights (Proudfoot, 2023). Coding commenced with manual annotation in Microsoft Word and later transitioned into thematic development in NVivo. The process was not linear; it evolved in response to fieldwork reflections, emergent policy reforms, supervisory discussions and research findings. This iterative and responsive nature contributed to the rigour and transparency of the study’s analytical procedures.

This study used a six-stage hybrid thematic analysis adapted from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), combining a priori codes derived from the theoretical framework with inductive insights emerged from the empirical data. The coding process was iterative, abductive, and comparative, enabling the identification of both grounded themes on similar patterns and nuanced differences across cases. The three tables presented below focus specifically on the development of codes and themes related to the labour agency framework, which formed the analytical core of this study. Other themes such as migration motivations and temporal horizons were also coded and analysed, and are discussed in the relevant empirical chapters. Table 4.4 outlines the a priori code manual (Stage 1), Table 4.5 presents the progression from initial codes

to themes (Stages 2–5), and Table 4.6 shows the final comparative themes (Stage 5-6). As a comparative study, coding procedures were adapted to allow for both within-case thematic development and cross-case juxtaposition, adding analytical depth to the final discussion.

Stage 1: Developing the code manual

The code manual was developed a priori, drawing on research questions, theoretical frameworks on agency (Katz, 2004) and extensive literature review of labour migration regimes. Codes such as ‘resilience’, ‘reworking’, ‘resistance’, ‘constrained agency’ and ‘temporality’ were predefined. Each parent code in the manual was accompanied by definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and indicators to guide consistent application. For instance, Table 4.4 below captures three key parent codes developed a priori: resilience, reworking and resistance.

Table 4.4: Key parent codes developed from Katz's (2004) framework

Parent code	Definition	Inclusion (code when...)	Exclusion/overlaps	Indicators
Resilience (work-related & migration-related)	Everyday practices that allow individuals to endure and/or cope with hardship in response to platform precarity and migration constraints.	Participant reframes hardship; endure rude customers, unstable income; uses social networks for informal support.	If the intent is to <i>improve</i> conditions (→Reworking) or confront rules (→Resistance).	“Just gets by”; “accept or endure”; “stepping stone”; emotional buffering; <i>laoxiang</i> /co-ethnic support
Reworking (work-related & migration-related)	Tactical efforts to improve one's (material) situation within platforms and labour migration structures by redistributing resources.	Multi-apping; switching platforms/job sectors; sequencing study and work visas for extended legal stay; choose majors on skill lists.	If there is rule-bending (→Resistance) or mere acceptance (→Resilience).	“Switch to platforms with better management or pay”; “left construction for delivery”; change work modes from <i>zhuansong</i> to <i>zhongbao</i>
Resistance (work-related & migration-related)	Acts that confront or subvert platform management or migration rules, from micro digital tactics to rule-bending of visa status.	Bypassing app settings for timings and ratings; account renting; exceeding work hour limits; visa workarounds.	Purely tactical optimisation without breaching rules (→Reworking).	Mark order as “picked up” or “delivered” in advance; work with tourist visa via rented accounts; “work as long as I want”

Stage 2: Testing the reliability of codes

To assess clarity and internal consistency, the code manual was piloted on a small subset of transcripts from interviews with demographically diverse participants (to account for possible variation in responses by participants' country, gender, and migrant status). This pilot revealed minor boundary ambiguities, such as distinguishing between accepting precarious conditions as tolerable (i.e. resilience) and tactical optimisation to improve the conditions (i.e., reworking) and rule-bending tactics to improve one's conditions (i.e., resistance). Adjustments were made accordingly in the code manual, and feedback from supervisory discussions further supported refinements. The finalised template preserved theoretical rigour while allowing flexibility for empirical nuance.

Stage 3: Summarising data and identifying initial themes

Stage 3 was dedicated to being immersed in the data and summarising each interview, which helped identify initial themes. All the transcripts were reviewed in full to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and practices and summarised through narrative memos capturing the participant's migration trajectory, temporal outlook, work experiences, and agency expressions. Agency practices were categorised into work-related and migration-related domains to reflect the dual analytical focus of this study. Importantly, the goal at this stage was not to quantify theme frequency, but to identify meaningful behaviours, even if they were mentioned only once, that demonstrated distinctive dimensions of migrant agency. For example, one participant's use of sequential visa strategies to extend his legal stay in Australia was flagged as a unique but critical migration-related reworking practice. The close readings of transcripts produced a range of granular, data-proximate codes under each parent category. For example,

under resilience, codes included “ignoring ill-treatment,” “accept long working hours for its flexibility” and “chance to explore the city and relax”. These initial codes and themes are presented Table 4.5, which formed the foundation for next-stage systematic NVivo coding.

Stage 4: Applying template of codes and additional coding

At Stage 4, the initial round of line-by-line coding was conducted in NVivo using the predefined code template, while remaining open to inductive emergence of new codes from empirical data. When data segments did not align with predefined codes, new codes were created, with analytic memos attached. Ongoing adjustments to codes and themes were recorded in memos to maintain a transparent audit trail. This iterative process enabled the framework to capture both theory-driven patterns and grounded insights while maintaining analytical coherence and comparability across the Australian and Chinese datasets (see Table 4.5).

Stage 5: Connecting codes and identifying themes (within-case and cross-case)

In this phase, codes were connected to answer the research questions and identify themes that could support the creation of coherent narratives. First-order codes were clustered into broader themes within each parent code. This process was carried out separately for the Australian and Chinese cases to preserve contextual specificity. Initial themes, such as “emotional sense-making” or “coping through informal support networks”, were then compared across cases to identify shared patterns and context-specific divergences. For instance, both countries exhibited themes of informal network-based resilience, but their function and affective weight differed. Similarly, while “migration pathway reworking” appeared in both contexts, the mechanisms varied significantly, with visa sequencing in Australia versus compliance with

points-based *hukou* strategies in China. These patterns, documented in Table 4.5 and further synthesised in Table 4.6, reflect the iterative, abductive movement between empirical findings and theoretical interpretation.

Table 4.5: Initial codes and themes

Code Manual (deductive)	Initial codes (inductive)	Initial Themes (inductive)
Resilience (both work-related and migration-related)	Ignore ill-treatment, do not think about it	Normalising ill-treatment
	Regard it as ‘normal’ for migrants or platform workers	
	Accept long working hours for its flexibility	Enduring to maximise income
	Endure it for relatively high income	
	Just a temporary job to be endured; ‘stepping stone’	
Good opportunity to become familiar with labour market	Reframing it as a means to achieve other goals	
Chance to explore the city and relax		
Earn and save money for study/travel		
Valuable life experience		
Feel less lonely by joining co-ethnic chat groups	Coping through informal network: practical help and emotional support	
Make friends and celebrate festivals for a sense of belonging		
Sharing job information in social media groups		
Find jobs and accommodation via co-ethnic networks or <i>laoxiang</i> ties		

Reworking (both work-related and migration-related)	Multi-apping Select optimal time for delivery (e.g., peak hours, night time) Strategically reject/cancel unfavourable orders Buy gifts or compensate customers for late delivery	Income-maximising tactics
	Generate additional income on social media by sharing platform work experience as migrants Turn it into monetised consultancy services for other workers	Creative use of social media to generate income
	Quit undesirable jobs and join platform work Intend to quit platform work for more stable income Switch to better-paying food-delivery platform Switch between <i>zhuansong</i> and <i>zhongbao</i> work mode (specific to Chinese case)	Job mobility: switching jobs/platforms/work modes
	Churn between different temporary visas to prolong legal stay and create pathways towards permanency (specific to Australian case)	Short-term visa planning/transitions for continuous legality
	Strategically select majors or jobs based on skill lists (specific to Australian case)	Improve the eligibility for skilled migration or permanent residency
	Chinese case: Buy property to obtain <i>hukou</i> Participate in the social security system to fulfill the criteria under points-based <i>hukou</i> scheme	Signal eligibility for local <i>hukou</i>

Resistance (both work-related and migration-related)	Mark order ‘picked up’/ ‘delivered’ in advance and upload random photos as proof to avoid penalties	Work-related rule-bending
	Not wearing uniform as required	
	Choose not to do deliveries with vague or incorrect addresses, consider the order as unclaimed and take it themselves	
	Only in Australian case: Rent others’ accounts to work when ineligible (e.g., tourist visa)	Non-compliance with migration rules: Strategic/misuse of student visas, tourist visas, bridging visas
	‘Work as long as you want’ and exceed student visa work hour limits	
	Student visa holders: Minimal attendance of class just to retain visa; Outsource assignments	
	Submit bogus protection visa claims to gain temporary lawful residence during the processing period and extend their stay	
	Send remittances back home without paying local income tax	Non-compliance with social rules
	Not paying fines for speeding or traffic violations	

Table 4.6: Final major themes and sub-themes

Parent code	Final Major Themes (as how they are set up for Ch.8 Discussion)	Final Sub-themes
Resilience	Emotional response and meaning-making	Instrumental & transitional resilience (AU) Normalised & prolonged resilience (CN)
	Social networks supporting resilience	Low-level collective agency Instrumental co-ethnic networks Affective <i>laoxiang</i> ties

Reworking	In-platform tactical reworking	Prioritise income maximisation and flexibility (AU) Defensive and intricate strategies to mitigate penalties (CN)
	‘Exit’ as reworking	Platform switching Job switching Constrained mobility
	Migration-oriented reworking: navigating migrant status	Procedural reworking & staggered temporality (AU) Performative reworking & deferred temporality (CN)
Resistance	Everyday work-related resistance	Tactical in-platform rule-bending Individualised micro-resistance Covert forms of resistance
	Migration-related Resistance: Exploiting the loopholes	Presence vs. absence of such acts

Stage 6: Corroborating and legitimating comparative themes

The final stage focused on corroborating and legitimating previously identified themes to ensure analytical rigour, trustworthiness and validity. Each theme was re-examined through cross-checking with original interview transcripts and the coded NVivo data to ensure that the themes were supported by empirical evidence. Comparative patterns were refined and validated against the theoretical framework and contextual knowledge, leading to the generation of final themes and sub-themes presented in Table 4.6 and elaborated on in Chapters 6–8.

While preliminary comparative observations began emerging during earlier coding stages, the explicit comparison between the Australian and Chinese cases was reserved for the Discussion chapter (Chapter 8). Chapters 6 and 7 present the findings for each national context independently, focusing on the specific forms and dynamics of migrant platform workers’

agency in each country setting. Thus, the cross-case analysis was conducted iteratively but analytically separated from the country-specific presentations to preserve contextual depth.

Throughout the process of the six-stage hybrid thematic analysis, NVivo's matrix coding and query functions were used to support the comparison of themes across two cases and to identify any divergent and convergent patterns in workers' agency given the most-different systems design logic applied. Comparative tables and narrative summaries were created to compare codes and major themes across Australia and China. For themes common to both cases, such as 'emotional response and meaning-making' under resilience, both the rationale for similarities and how these expressions differed in emphasis, mechanisms, institutional embeddedness and workers' temporal horizons were explored. For themes unique to one case such as 'non-compliance of migration rules' in the Australian case, specific institutional contexts that may contribute to the observed phenomenon were examined. With these comparative reflections, relevant literature and the theoretical framework were engaged with to seek further theoretical and empirical support for the observed patterns. This iterative process ensured that the interpretations were not only data-driven but also deeply embedded within current literature.

This comparative step added an extra layer of insights, enabling an exploration of why certain forms of agency were observed in one context but not in the other, how similar forms of agency manifested differently, and how structural conditions were shaping such differences. The comparative themes and sub-themes consolidated during this stage formed the basis for the interpretive synthesis presented in Chapter 8.

4.5 Summary

This methodology chapter has detailed the comparative approach used in this case study, emphasising the robust qualitative research design. It highlighted the application of most-different systems design and the selection of Australia and China as the ‘most-different’ cases for comparison, as well as the contextualised and ‘slow’ comparative approach used in this study. This approach enabled analysis of broad similar patterns with context-specific manifestations influenced by different national institutional contexts. The data collection processes were described, including participant recruitment, semi-structured interviews and secondary data collected from document analysis. The process of hybrid thematic analysis of empirical data were also presented in detail through a stage-by-stage elaboration. In sum, the methodology presented in this chapter establishes a solid foundation for addressing the research question and producing context-sensitive insights into how labour migration regimes shape migrant platform workers’ agency.

The findings from the 60 interviews and document analysis are presented in subsequent findings chapters. The country-specific findings of the Australian case are presented in Chapter 6 and the Chinese case in Chapter 7, exploring the migrant platform workers’ work and migration life experiences, and workers’ varying temporal horizons and agency practices. Chapter 8 provides a comparative discussion that synthesises these findings across two cases, focusing on the impacts of cross-national differences and similarities on migrant labour agency.

CHAPTER 5 Context

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the institutional and structural contexts that shape migrant workers' experiences in food-delivery platform work in Australia and China. It provides the empirical and regulatory backdrop against which the agency practices of migrant workers, examined in subsequent chapters, can be more fully understood. Rather than viewing platform work or migration as standalone phenomena, the chapter situates them within broader labour migration regimes, revealing how migration policies, legal frameworks and socio-economic institutions configure the constraints and opportunities that migrant workers navigate.

This chapter specifically examines labour migration regimes and the development of the on-demand platform economy, particularly food-delivery platforms in each case study country. As defined in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2), this study conceptualises labour migration regimes as the institutional systems of migration policies, visa regulations and employment regulatory frameworks that govern migrants' legal status, employment rights and protections, and settlement opportunities. These shape how internal or international migrants enter and stay in the city or country, how they are positioned in the labour market post-arrival, and what forms of agency they can exercise. This chapter explores how the two countries' different labour migration regimes govern migrant workers' legal status and mobility, employment rights and protections, access to social welfare, and pathways to permanent residency in Australia or urban *hukou* in China. By doing so, it sets the context for understanding the structural conditions under which migrant platform workers navigate and express their agency. The chapter also explores platform workers' legal classifications and how platform work organisation interacts with workers' migration status to produce distinct experiences of precarity.

This chapter is structured as follows. Sections 5.2 and 5.3 examine the labour migration regimes of Australia and China respectively. Section 5.4 focuses on the development and organisation of the food-delivery platform work in each country, including the nature of on-demand platform business models, regulatory framework and worker demographics. This section also highlights why migrant workers are overrepresented in this sector, and how they become hyper-precarious at the intersection of labour migration regimes and platform labour regimes.

5.2 International labour migration regime in Australia

Following the formal abolition of the White Australia policy in the 1970s, Australia established family and skilled immigration programs focusing on permanent immigration. Since the mid-1990s, Australia's labour migration landscape has undergone a significant transformation from a permanent, citizenship-oriented paradigm to one increasingly reliant on temporary migrant workers (Clibborn & Wright, 2022). This shift is characterised by the expansion of temporary visa schemes such as employer-sponsored visas, working holiday visas and international student visas, moving towards a 'guest-worker' regime in Australia (Wright & Clibborn, 2020). While Australia's temporary migration programs include a temporary skilled scheme to address labour shortages, temporary visa holders have restricted rights and protections, and diminished agency and bargaining power compared to permanent residents and citizens. In other words, while large intakes of temporary migrant workers have improved the 'efficiency' of the Australian labour market, migrant workers' 'voice' and 'equity' have been compromised in the process, with increasing incidence of wage theft and other mistreatment being reported (Clibborn & Wright, 2018, 2022; Zou, 2015).

In response, the newly elected Australian Government under Prime Minister Albanese released a new *Migration Strategy* in December 2023, including reforms designed to reduce mistreatment of migrant workers, improve labour market responsiveness of temporary skilled migration and quality of international student migration (Wright & Clibborn, 2024). However, these reforms do not fully address the structural vulnerabilities of temporary migrants and have had limited relevance to low-wage migrant workers in informal sectors such as on-demand food-delivery, where precarious working conditions remain largely unaddressed. Moreover, this study's empirical fieldwork was conducted prior to these reforms, and therefore captures the experiences of migrant platform workers before their implementation.

Migration studies scholars have investigated the critical role of immigration policies and employment regulations in governing migrants' entry, residency, working rights and mobility, and how these institutional factors shape migrant workers' agency within the labour market (Bauder, 2006; Wright et al., 2022; Wright & Clibborn, 2020). The following sections examine these four dimensions to demonstrate how Australia's labour migration regime shapes temporary migrant workers' work and living conditions.

5.2.1 Legal status and mobility

Australia's immigration rules and visa streams are the primary mechanisms through which the labour migration regime stratifies migrant workers' legal status. Rather than offering equal access to employment opportunities, different visa types impose different constraints that influence migrant workers' job choices, mobility and their capacity to resist or exit unfavourable conditions in the labour market (Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Wright & Clibborn, 2020). For

example, with the employer-sponsored Temporary Skill Shortage Visa,ⁱⁱ an individual's employment is legally tied to a single employer for a period of up to four years. The risk of visa cancellation following job termination often results in workers' dependency on employers, whereby workers are more controllable, and may feel compelled to accept unfavourable work conditions to secure both their employment and their legal residence status (Wright et al., 2017, 2021). This dependence constrains temporary skilled labour's job mobility and strengthens employer control (Velayutham, 2013; Wright et al., 2021).

Although international students and working holiday makers (WHMs) are not tied to employers, their visas impose regulatory controls such as working hour limits and duration restrictions that restrict their ability to access stable or higher-skilled employment (Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Reilly, 2015). For instance, while student visa holders are legally permitted to move between employers, they cannot work over 48 hours per fortnight during the study period (Department of Home Affairs, 2023). This regulatory restriction often funnels them into precarious, low-paid and informal sectors such as hospitality, retail and food-delivery industries, where breaches of visa conditions are less likely to be reported (Barratt et al., 2020; Clibborn, 2021). For working holiday makers (WHMs), the requirement to complete 88 days of specified work, usually in regional areas, for a second-year visa extension leads to a form of labour immobility, where job choices are often determined by visa requirements rather than by labour market opportunity or personal aspirations (Reilly et al., 2018; Tan & Lester, 2012). Another rule on working holiday makers that they cannot work for an employer for more than 6 months further makes them unattractive to many employers, and thus they often undertake low-skilled seasonal jobs such as in horticulture industry (Reilly et al., 2018). As Wright et al. (2022)

ⁱⁱ While the Temporary Skill Shortage visa is one of the core components of Australia's labour migration regime, it is not commonly held by workers engaged in low-wage, on-demand work such as food-delivery.

revealed, the Working Holiday Scheme has become a *de facto* low-skilled visa, funnelling working holiday makers into precarious, low-paid jobs with limited opportunities for skill development or upward mobility.

Another relevant but often overlooked category is the bridging visa,ⁱⁱⁱ a temporary visa granted to non-citizens who are awaiting decisions on new substantive visa applications. Bridging visa holders generally retain the right to stay in Australia lawfully and may also be granted working rights, depending on the conditions of their previous visa and the type of visa being applied for (Department of Home Affairs, 2025a). This visa category has seen significant growth in recent years, possibly due to delays in visa processing and its strategic use by migrants to extend their stay and access employment opportunities (Azeredo, 2025).

Across these temporary migration schemes, visa-related constraints increase migrant workers' legal insecurity and reliance on employers, leading to what has been conceptualised as “unfree labour” (Fudge, 2014). Structural immobility, whether enforced through employer dependence, regulatory controls or temporality, limits migrant workers' capacity to act on precarity and improve their conditions by exiting exploitative employment relationships (Reilly et al., 2018; Robertson, 2019; Wright et al., 2021).

5.2.2 Rights and protections at work

Although temporary migrant workers in Australia are legally entitled to the same minimum employment standards as permanent residents and citizens, in practice they are disproportionately exposed to rights violations, including underpayment, unsafe working conditions, and other forms of mistreatment (Clibborn & Wright, 2018; Farbenblum & Berg,

ⁱⁱⁱ While not one of the main official visa categories in Australia's migration system, the bridging visa is relevant to this study. Several interview participants were on bridging visas at the time of the research.

2020; Reilly, 2015). Wage theft, for instance, is particularly salient among temporary migrants on working holiday makers and international student visas in low-wage, low-skilled jobs (Clibborn & Wright, 2018). A national survey of over 4,300 temporary visa holders found that 62% had been paid below the national minimum wage during their time in Australia (Berg & Farbenblum, 2017). Another survey of 1,433 international students in 2016 reported that 35% of participants were paid A\$12 per hour or less, compared to the national minimum wage of A\$17.70 at the time of the survey (Clibborn, 2021). These employer non-compliance issues are exacerbated by a combination of structural and practical barriers to enforcement.

At the institutional level, the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) as the government inspectorate, while responsible for ensuring employer compliance with labour standards, is under-resourced and has limited capacity to effectively monitor employers and investigate widespread non-compliance practices (Clibborn & Wright, 2018; Hardy & Howe, 2009). Meanwhile, in the context of Australia's neoliberal labour market, union membership density has fallen from 40% in 1992 to 13.1% of all workers and 7.9% in the private sector in 2024 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024), weakening unions' capacity to represent mistreated workers (Cooper & Ellem, 2008). As union coverage remains historically low, particularly in industries employing large numbers of temporary migrants such as hospitality, retail, agriculture and non-standard platform work, these workers are often excluded from collective bargaining mechanisms to exercise voice (Barratt et al., 2020; Clibborn & Wright, 2018; Reilly et al., 2018).

Migrant workers' individual characteristics are compounding the institutional limitations. Facing language barriers, a large proportion of temporary migrant workers are unaware of their legal rights and entitlements, resulting in common employer non-compliance and workers' increased susceptibility to mistreatment (Clibborn, 2021). Additionally, many temporary

migrants refrain from reporting mistreatment or asserting their rights due to fear of employer retaliation, especially when continued employment and residency is tied to their visa conditions (Clibborn & Wright, 2018). For instance, international students exceeding their work hour limits may endure poor conditions rather than seeking redress to avoid jeopardising their visa status (Howe, 2019).

While formal legal protections exist, the interaction of weak enforcement, limited collective representation via unions and precarious visa conditions undermines temporary migrant workers' capacity to assert their rights and challenge exploitative conditions. Their agency is therefore constrained not only by legal status, but also by the absence of institutional support mechanisms (Clibborn & Wright, 2022).

5.2.3 Access to social rights and welfare

Beyond the workplace, Australia's labour migration regime institutionalises unequal access to social welfare and entitlements, which is tied to workers' residency status. Temporary migrants are often excluded from public welfare such as unemployment benefits, government-subsidised healthcare, education and childcare (Wright et al., 2022). As Bauder (2006) noted, such exclusion shifts the burden of social reproduction from the state to individual migrants, while maximising the efficiency of the migrant-receiving labour market. The consequences of this exclusion are twofold. First, without any safety net, temporary migrants become more susceptible to income insecurity and job loss, thereby increasing their dependence on employment even when it is unsafe or underpaid (Boese & Macdonald, 2017; Clibborn, 2021). Second, the lack of institutional support leaves migrants socially and economically insecure,

therefore weakening their capacity to resist exploitative conditions (Dauvergne & Marsden, 2014; Wright & Clibborn, 2020).

5.2.4 Pathways to permanent residency

Australia is often described as a ‘nation of immigrants’ that provides expanded temporary migration schemes and pathways to permanent residency, with two principal routes dominating the transition process: the employer-sponsored temporary skilled visa stream and the education-migration pathway (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023a; Khoo et al., 2008; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). For both temporary skilled migrants and international students, a strong desire for long-term settlement often underpins their initial migration decisions. Therefore, as part of the education-migration nexus policies, a points-based system is used to screen and select desirable workers, allowing a large number of graduates to apply for permanent residency as skilled migrants (Robertson, 2011, 2014).

While Australia’s migration regime continues to offer pathways for obtaining permanent residency, recent policy reforms have increasingly narrowed the pathways to transition from temporary to permanent visas (Wright et al., 2022; Wright & Clibborn, 2020). For international students, for instance, since the 2000s, student-migrant pathways have become increasingly complex and narrow, with a reduced number of qualifying occupations for skilled migration, extended waiting periods, and a changing focus of skilled migration in favour of employer sponsorship. Meanwhile, the government has put less focus on the independent (non-sponsored) skilled stream that many international students had relied on to obtain permanent residency (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). The length of stay for temporary graduate visa (i.e., post-study work visa) has been shortened, with tightened age limits introduced in 2024 (Department

of Home Affairs, 2024). Although other visa types, such as the Temporary Skill Shortage visa, offer structured transition pathways to permanent residency for some skilled migrants, these visas are only held by workers that have been sponsored by their employers – a condition that did not apply to any of the participants in this study. For the temporary visa streams, the process to permanency has become more unpredictable and protracted due to the frequent changes in policies and administrative procedures (Robertson, 2014, 2019). This growing gap between temporary and permanent residency reflects a broader structural change in Australia's labour migration regime, where short-term labour market flexibility and efficiency is increasingly prioritised over long-term migrant integration, in turn reinforcing the guest-worker model in Australia (Wright & Clibborn, 2020).

Scholars have found that a growing number of migrant workers remain on bridging visas or other temporary visa streams while awaiting decisions on subsequent visa applications, with some remaining in a form of 'long-term temporariness' in which migrants stay in the labour market for extended periods without access to secure legal status and social entitlements (Azeredo, 2025; Robertson, 2019; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). This prolonged uncertainty and temporariness have significant implications on worker agency. The liminality of migrant workers' legal status weakens their bargaining power and constrains their agency such that migrant workers navigating this uncertain terrain often adopt a strategy of compliance, avoiding open confrontation or legal claims in order to preserve their prospects of extended residency or even permanency (Bauder, 2006; Boucher, 2025; Wright et al., 2021).

The interaction of visa-based structural immobility, weak enforcement, social welfare exclusions, and narrowing permanent residency pathways has contributed to labour market segmentation in Australia (Clibborn, 2021; Wright & Clibborn, 2020). Temporary migrant

workers are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, insecure and often informal segments of the labour market, including hospitality, retail, agriculture and, increasingly, platform work industries (Howe, 2019; McDonald et al., 2019; Reilly et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2021). These temporary migrants' marginalised positioning is a structural outcome of Australia's labour migration regime, which opens the 'side door' and 'back door' for workers while channelling them into low-skilled jobs with inferior work conditions and minimal protections (Wright & Clibborn, 2017). Their ability to exercise labour agency and seek legal redress is therefore structurally constrained (Wright & Clibborn, 2020).

5.3 Internal labour migration regime in China

China has had massive waves of internal migration from rural to urban areas since the economic reforms in the 1980s. As of 2024, there were approximately 299 million 'peasant workers' (*nongmingong*), of whom 178 million had migrated beyond the locality of their registered residence, engaging in internal migration. Among them, 132 million – around 75% – were rural-to-urban migrants^{iv} residing and working in urban areas without local *hukou* status (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). These rural migrants have been central to China's industrialisation and urbanisation over the past four decades, yet remain institutionally marginalised under the *hukou*-based labour migration regime (Chan, 2019). China's internal labour migration regime can be broadly defined as a system of household registration control, labour employment regulations, and institutional exclusions that not only manage population movement within the

^{iv} Despite China's formal abolition of the agricultural/non-agricultural *hukou* distinction in 2014, this study uses the term 'rural-to-urban migrants' to denote individuals originating from rural areas who engage in urban employment while retaining institutional ties to their rural collectives (e.g., land rights). It is defined by their geographic trajectory (rural-to-urban movement) and institutional embeddedness in rural land systems, rather than obsolete household registration labels.

country, but also condition migrants' entry, stay and incorporation into the urban labour markets and society (Chan, 2009; Chan & Buckingham, 2008).

The household registration system (i.e., *hukou* system) has historically functioned as a key institutional mechanism for regulating internal migration and determining workers' eligibility for public goods, creating a spatialised and institutionalised discrepancy between rural and urban residents (Chan, 2019; Cheng & Selden, 1994). Established in the 1950s under a centrally planned economy, it classified citizens as either agricultural (rural) or non-agricultural (urban) residents, with their access to education, healthcare and social welfare tied to their registered residential location (i.e., *hukou*) and type of registration (i.e., rural vs. urban) (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Although reforms since the 1980s have loosened restrictions on rural-to-urban mobility via temporary residence permits and working permits, rural migrants remain institutionally excluded as their access to welfare benefits, social services and political participation remained tied to their rural *hukou* registration (Chan, 2009; Chan & Zhang, 1999; Kuang & Liu, 2012). Since the 1990s, the Chinese government initiated selective *hukou* reforms to expand access to urban *hukou* and facilitate *hukou* conversion, including zero-threshold policies in small cities and points-based systems in larger urban centres (Chen et al., 2024). However, in megacities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, conversion remains highly restrictive and competitive, with thresholds based on stable income, high levels of education, and property ownership (Li & Chen, 2024; Li et al., 2022).

While the *hukou* system has shifted from rigid exclusion to a more stratified form of conditional inclusion, in practice it reinforced spatial hierarchies and social stratification between rural migrants and urban locals (Chan, 2019; Yang & Guo, 2022). While the physical rural-urban boundary has become permeable, the institutional rural-urban divide persists, and continues to

shape rural migrants' experiences, access to rights and labour agency in the host society. The following sections examine rural migrant labour's experience from four dimensions to demonstrate how today's internal labour migration regime shape the working and living conditions of rural-to-urban migrant labour in China.

5.3.1 Labour market access and job mobility

Following recent *hukou* reforms, China's internal labour migration regime imposes no formal legal restrictions on the employment rights of rural-to-urban migrants. Therefore, in theory they can freely access urban labour markets, enjoying full legal rights to work, change jobs, and reside in cities (Chan, 2019; Guo & Iredale, 2004). In practice, however, their access to employment and job mobility is shaped by a range of institutional constraints linked to the *hukou* system.

Despite legal equality in employment rights, rural migrants are disadvantaged in public sectors because some of these jobs, such as government jobs, civil service positions, and jobs in state-owned enterprises, often require or favour urban local *hukou* (Démurger et al., 2009; Guo & Iredale, 2004). These employer preferences constrain rural migrants' access to certain types of jobs, especially in more stable and prestigious segments (e.g., public sectors) of the labour market (Ma, 2018). Additionally, although rural migrants often engage in jobs that urban residents tend not to undertake, the effects of institutional discrimination still manifest in higher job search costs, and greater vulnerability during job transitions (Zhang, 2010). Scholars have also found that rural migrants' constrained mobility is shaped by their narrow social networks, which offer limited information and channels for more stable jobs in formal sectors (Lin et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2014; Zhang, 2010). Lastly, the long-standing *hukou*-based divisions have contributed to a segmented urban labour market that restricts upward mobility for rural migrants

(Démurger et al., 2009; Yang & Guo, 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2017). Statistics show that rural migrant workers are disproportionately concentrated in labour-intensive and low-wage sectors, with 27.9% in manufacturing, 14.3% in construction and 13.6% in retail industries in 2024 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2025). These sectors are characterised by high turnover, limited protections, and few opportunities for advancement (Ngai & Chan, 2012; Swider, 2015). This occupational stratification reflects both labour market dynamics and the institutional exclusions caused by the *hukou* system, which continues to limit rural migrants' upward mobility in the urban labour markets.

5.3.2 Rights at work and protections

Despite the formal legal equality in employment rights for all workers, rural migrant workers in China remain disproportionately exposed to labour rights violations, such as unpaid wages and unsafe working conditions (Gao, 2025; Keung Wong et al., 2007; Sun, 2012). These violations are particularly prevalent in sectors that predominantly employ rural migrants, such as construction and manufacturing industries (Démurger et al., 2009; Swider, 2015). A key structural reason of the prevalence of rights violations is the widespread absence of formal labour contracts among rural migrants. A large proportion of rural migrants engage in informal and temporary work through subcontractors or labour dispatch firms, where formal labour contracts are often unavailable (Jiang et al., 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2017). While labour contract coverage is common in large state-owned enterprises, only around 13% of employees in the non-state sectors – where most rural migrants are employed – are covered by formal labour contracts (Cheng et al., 2014). This absence of contractual protection undermines rural migrant workers' ability to access social insurance schemes, such as medical insurance coverage or pension schemes (Cheng et al., 2014; Ma, 2018). The vulnerability is further amplified by the growing concentration of

rural migrants in platform work, where employment relationships are often subcontracted, excluding workers from standard labour protections and employment-based citizenship rights in urban areas (Chang & Huang, 2023; Liu, 2019; Yang & Guo, 2022).

Another factor contributing to the persistent mistreatment of rural migrants is the lack of effective mechanisms for redress (Halegua, 2008). Unlike Australia where independent trade unions represent workers in collective bargaining, unions in China are usually seen as instruments of the state as they must be registered under the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and cannot act independently (Zhu et al., 2011). As the sole legally recognised union body, the ACFTU is mainly set up for facilitating compliance and maintaining social stability rather than organising worker-led advocacy or collective bargaining (Lu et al., 2010; Zhu et al., 2011). This is particularly evident in the platform economy, where despite advocacy by the ACFTU for better protections, its efforts have been limited to issuing guidelines and encouraging unionisation without substantial impact (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Muldoon & Sun, 2024). Independent attempts to informally organise platform workers, such as the Delivery Knights Alliance, have been suppressed, demonstrating the absence of formal support for informal workers in China (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Liu, 2021). Enterprise-level union branches are often led by company-appointed representatives, thus undermining union independence and accountability to workers (Lu et al., 2010).

These structural limitations are compounded by representational disparities in union membership between rural migrant and urban local workers. Between 2010 and 2018, union density for rural migrants ranged from just 1.4% to 5.3%, in contrast to 8.6% to 29.2% among urban workers, leading to the widened wage gap and a persistent gap in accessing institutional voice mechanisms in China (Ma, 2024; Ma & Komatsu, 2024). Despite growing union

membership, a recent report shows that only 16% of rural-to-urban migrants joined unions in 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Consequently, rural migrants are less likely to collectively organise or benefit from collective bargaining, reinforcing their precarious and vulnerable status in China's urban labour market.

5.3.3 Access to social rights and welfare benefits

A defining feature of China's internal labour migration regime is the systematic exclusion of rural migrants from urban social welfare systems (Chan, 2019). Without local *hukou*, rural-to-urban migrants are institutionally disadvantaged in accessing public services, including education, healthcare, housing and social security (Chen et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2015). More specifically, public education remains closely tied to *hukou* registration, with many migrant children's access to public schools being denied or pushed into under-resourced private schools, contributing to the widespread phenomenon of 'left-behind children' in rural areas (Qi, 2019). While urban social insurance schemes have become more inclusive and open to some migrants (Yang & Guo, 2022), coverage remains limited, particularly for rural migrants, with only 20.5% receiving medical insurance, 19% receiving pensions and 15% covered by unemployment insurance (Huang et al., 2020; Long, 2021). Similarly, government-subsidised housing is restricted to registered urban residents, excluding rural migrants from public housing support (Qi, 2019).

Without access to the social safety net in urban areas, many rural migrants become more reliant on precarious paid jobs and have limited capacity to pursue long-term life goals such as stable housing, education for children, or integration into urban life (Huang et al., 2020; Tang & Hao, 2018). Although recent *hukou* reforms have sought to ease inequalities by expanding migrants' access to certain basic services (e.g., health insurance), substantial disparities persist,

particularly in megacities where local governments have kept high eligibility thresholds (Chen et al., 2024; Yang & Guo, 2022). These institutional exclusions from social welfare and public services emphasise the importance of *hukou* conversion as a pathway to obtain full urban citizenship, which is explored further in the next section.

5.3.4 Pathways to local urban hukou

While migrants are legally permitted to live and work in cities without local *hukou*, they are perceived as *de facto* urban residents rather than *de jure* citizens (Yang & Guo, 2022). Thus, understanding the pathways to urban *hukou* acquisition is crucial for examining rural migrants' prospects for permanent settlement, which further shape their temporal horizons, life experience and labour agency.

One formalised pathway is through direct talent recruitment programs targeting high-skilled professionals or investors. However, this route is accessible only to a limited subset of migrants and is largely not applicable to the majority of rural migrants employed in low-skilled, precarious jobs. A more institutionalised mechanism is the points-based *hukou* system adopted by most large cities as a policy tool to indirectly control internal migration. This system emerged as part of broader *hukou* reforms since 2014, which devolved substantial authority to local governments in setting differentiated *hukou* eligibility criteria to align with their different developmental strategies (Lao et al., 2022; Li & Chen, 2024). Under these points systems, migrants accumulate credits based on factors such as age, educational level, professional qualifications, length of residence, social insurance contributions, tax payment history and home ownership (Chen et al., 2024). The points-based *hukou* conversion process is inherently long term and cumulative as it requires migrants to maintain stable employment, contribute

consistently to tax and social insurance systems, and reside in the city over an extended period (Deng & Bjorn, 2014; Zhang & Tao, 2012). These are challenging conditions for rural migrants who are often engaged in precarious, informal employment or frequently relocated (Li & Chen, 2024; Tang & Hao, 2018). While designed to make *hukou* conversion appear more transparent and impartial, the points system in practice reinforces social stratification among migrant workers because the criteria disproportionately reward those with stable formal employment, higher education and substantial financial resources (Dong & Goodburn, 2020; Li & Chen, 2024). These requirements further create a prolonged state of conditional belonging, whereby migrants may invest years into eligibility without any guaranteed outcome.

Even among those who meet the point thresholds, success is not guaranteed as the number of available *hukou* slots is tightly capped, turning the *hukou* conversion into a competitive ranking process, particularly in large cities (Zhang & Tao, 2012). For example, in 2023, Guangzhou offered only 15,000 *hukou* for over 10 million non-registered residents, while Beijing granted only 6,003 in one year (Municipal Migrant Service Administration, 2024). These low quotas, combined with demanding criteria and intense competition, mean that even qualified applicants are often trapped in a process with little certainty about their prospects (Lao et al., 2022; Li & Chen, 2024). Recent studies show that while China's average urban settlement probability (i.e., probability of obtaining urban *hukou*) has reached 91% by 2022, first-tier cities reported drastically lower probabilities such as Beijing (0.19%), Shanghai (1.44%), and Guangzhou (9.08%) (Chen et al., 2024). This indicates a clear mismatch between migrants' aspirations for urban settlement and the structural feasibility of *hukou* conversion in large cities. For many, the perceived impossibility of success discourages them from applying for conversion,

leading instead to a condition of prolonged temporary residence without *hukou* or eventual return to rural hometowns (Hu et al., 2011; Li & Liu, 2020; Tang & Hao, 2018).

These dynamics in the *hukou*-based labour migration regime have broader implications for migrant temporality and urban integration. The *hukou* regime produces what scholars have described as ‘liminal status’, where rural migrants remain living and working in cities for extended periods without having full urban citizenship (Chan, 2010b; Keung Wong et al., 2007; Tang & Hao, 2018). Constant policy changes, opaque procedures, and city-level discretion further exacerbate this uncertainty, making long-term life planning less likely for rural-to-urban migrants (Liu & Wang, 2020). As a result, many of them remain trapped in a transient status of urban existence, even after years of residence.

In sum, despite formal legal access to urban citizenship and employment, rural migrants remain disadvantaged within a segmented labour market, subject to weaker protections, limited social entitlements, and narrow, stratified pathways to full urban citizenship. While recent reforms have introduced formal channels for settlement, and signalled a shift towards more inclusive urban settlement policies, these avenues systematically privilege elite migrants and exclude those in precarious employment through setting high thresholds, particularly in top-tier cities (Dong & Goodburn, 2020; Li & Chen, 2024). Some scholars have criticised that many of these reforms remain largely cosmetic, offering symbolic concessions while maintaining the core exclusionary logics of the *hukou* regime (Chan, 2019; Chen et al., 2024). It contributes to rural migrants’ prolonged precarity and reinforces a two-tiered urban citizenship, whereby migrants are *de facto* urban residents while denied equal access to urban citizenship rights. Therefore, this institutional configuration continues to regulate migrants’ rights and entitlements and shape their

temporal horizons and future prospects, reinforcing the structural marginalisation of rural migrants within China's evolving labour migration regime.

While Australia and China operate under different migration systems – one governing international mobility, the other focusing on internal movement – both regimes impose multi-layered barriers that constrain migrant workers' agency in similar ways. Across both contexts, migrants face insecure legal status, limited access to stable and desirable employment, exclusion from social protections, and structurally narrow or uncertain pathways to permanent settlement or residency, all of which undermine workers' mobility and ability to negotiate better working conditions. These common structural constraints are particularly significant in the context of food-delivery platform work, which is further unpacked in the following sector. Recognising these shared features is essential for further analysing how different labour migration regimes shape similar forms of precarity and constrained and individualised expressions of agency among platform migrant workers in Australia and China.

5.4 Context of food-delivery platform work

Migrant platform workers operate at the intersection of labour migration regimes and platform labour contexts. While the preceding sections examined how labour migration regimes in Australia and China shape migrants' legal status, this section shifts attention to the platform economy in these two countries to examine the structural and institutional configurations of on-demand platform work in which migrants are engaged. It focuses on how the organisation, regulation and governance of platform work, in combination with migration policies, shape the conditions under which migrant workers navigate precarity, access opportunities and exercise agency.

Among the different types of work in the platform economy (e.g., on-demand work, crowdwork), this thesis focuses on on-demand app-based platform work, characterised by algorithmic control and offline tasks mediated through digital platforms such as food-delivery and ridesharing (De Stefano, 2016). While regulatory debates often address the broader category of platform work (Forsyth, 2020; Stewart & Stanford, 2017), this section focuses specifically on the app-based food-delivery sector.

In contextualising migrant platform workers' experiences in these two institutional contexts, the following two sub-sections first outlines the development and regulation of on-demand platform work in Australia and China respectively, focusing on the legal classification of platform workers in each country, the regulatory frameworks governing this sector, and the institutional protections (or lack thereof) available to platform workers. It then investigates the organisation and operation of food-delivery platforms, highlighting their business models, algorithmic structures and managerial arrangements. Both sections conclude by examining the overrepresentation of migrant workers on food-delivery platforms in the country, exploring how labour migration regimes and platform dynamics interact to shape migrants' participation in this type of work. As such, it offers a contextual understanding of how legal, institutional and labour market configurations of platform work not only structure the work itself, but also shape how migrant workers participate, experience and respond to it.

5.4.1 Food-delivery platform work in Australia

In Australia, on-demand app-based platform work has expanded significantly over the past decade, particularly in sectors such as food-delivery and ridesharing (McDonald et al., 2019). According to the most recent national survey conducted by the Victorian Government in 2023,

24.6% of respondents (3,590 out of 14,608 participants) reported having undertaken work through digital platforms at some point, compared to only 13.1% in 2019 (McDonald et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2025). The data also reveals a diversification in types of platform work, with 35.2% of digital platform workers performing in-person services via platforms such as Uber and DoorDash, 21.9% performing exclusively online services, and the remaining 42.9% engaging in both types of work (Williams et al., 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated workers' participation in app-based platform work, particularly in food-delivery and transport, which became a critical source of income for many workers excluded from formal labour markets (Churchill, 2024; Williams et al., 2025).

The food-delivery platform market in Australia has undergone significant changes in both structure and competition, with some platforms such as Foodora and Deliveroo ceasing operations, while others such as DoorDash have entered more recently (Veen et al., 2025a). The market is now dominated by three major players: Uber Eats (38.2%), Menulog (34%), and DoorDash (27.9%) (Statista, 2025). Although pay rates vary by platform and location, a large proportion of food-delivery workers reported earnings below the national minimum wage (Marmo et al., 2022; Mawhinney et al., 2023). While comprehensive data on workers' economic dependence in the food-delivery sector is limited, such earnings may still serve as a primary source of income for many migrant workers who face exclusion from stable and formal employment (Clibborn, 2021; Van Den Broek et al., 2021). This growing significance of the platform economy has raised important questions around employment classification, rights at work, and the adequacy of Australia's existing regulatory frameworks, which are further explored below.

Legal classification of platform workers

In Australia, on-demand platform workers, including food-delivery workers and rideshare drivers, are typically engaged as independent contractors, and as a result excluded from employment protections such as minimum wage, unfair dismissal and collective bargaining (Barratt et al., 2022; Forsyth, 2020). The distinction between an employee and an independent contractor is assessed through a multifactor test, which considers the degree of control exercised by the workers, the ability to delegate tasks, and the provision of equipment, among other factors (Forsyth, 2020). The nature of food-delivery platform work, particularly its emphasis on flexible scheduling, multi-apping and minimal direct supervision, has contributed to its legal framing as a form of independent contracting rather than a standard employment relationship (Barratt et al., 2020a; Kaine & Josserand, 2019).

Legal challenges to this classification have been limited and largely unsuccessful in the Australian context (Veen et al., 2025a). In most instances, the Fair Work Commission has upheld the independent contractor status of on-demand platform workers, reinforcing the platforms' business model and their roles as technological intermediaries that avoid standard employment obligations (Barratt et al., 2022; Healy & Pekarek, 2025).^v In response to court cases and adverse findings, some platforms changed their contracts and operational management practices to stay 'debated' rather than 'illegitimate' in sustaining the operations in the labour market (Veen et al., 2025a). The Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), responsible for enforcing the *Fair Work Act*, has intervened only occasionally, often taking a cautious stance on enforcement (Forsyth, 2020). In contrast, trade unions have taken a more active role in challenging the regulatory void

^v Notable exceptions occurred in the case of *Klooger v Foodora Australia Pty Ltd* [2018] FWC 6836 and the case of *Diego Franco v Deliveroo Australia Pty Ltd* [2021] FWC 2818, where the Fair Work Commission determined that the delivery rider was an employee and therefore entitled to unfair dismissal protections (Fair Work Commission, 2018, 2022). The latter one was later overturned by the Full Bench of the FWC (Fair Work Commission, 2022).

surrounding platform work. With a primary focus on food-delivery and rideshare workers, the Transport Workers' Union (TWU) has actively organised campaigns advocating for better protections, mobilised protests and log-off strikes among platform workers, and supported legal submissions to the Fair Work Commission, acting as a key institutional actor in the contestation over worsened employment standards and working conditions under platform work regulation and operation (Forsyth, 2020; Transport Workers' Union, n.d.; Veen et al., 2025a). Despite these efforts, the union's overall influence on working conditions has remained limited so far, in part due to persistently low union membership among platform workers, especially migrants who often lack access to or awareness of collective forms of representation (Barratt et al., 2020; Clibborn & Wright, 2018). However, as a result of the Closing Loopholes Bill No. 2 Reforms, this may change, with the union having made multiple minimum standard order applications pertaining to platform work that were still being decided upon at the time of writing this thesis, and which were made after the data collection for the study had been completed.

The limitations of Australia's current framework have drawn growing criticism from scholars, policymakers, and advocacy groups. In response, the government introduced legislative reforms aimed at bridging the regulatory gap. The Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024 sought to create a new category of 'employee-like workers'^{vi} within the independent contractor framework (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2024). This category is designed to extend minimum standards – such as protections against unfair deactivation, pay and working conditions, collective agreements – through Minimum Standards Orders and Guidelines administered by the Fair Work Commission (Fair Work Commission, n.d.).

^{vi} Data in this study was collected prior to the reforms coming in place.

These developments reflect a slow but significant shift in the regulatory landscape, acknowledging the inadequacy of existing frameworks in addressing the risks and vulnerabilities experienced by platform workers in Australia. However, the evolution remains cautious, and platform workers continues to be shaped by limited protections and institutional and legal ambiguity (Forsyth, 2020; Munton & Rawling, 2023; Veen et al., 2025a).

Food-delivery platform work organisation

On-demand platform work in Australia, particularly in food-delivery, is usually considered as a flexible and autonomous form of employment, in which workers can determine when and where to work, and operate across multiple platforms (Goods et al., 2019; Veen et al., 2020). Yet, a growing body of research challenges this perception, revealing the extent to which algorithmic systems and incentive structures significantly constrain worker autonomy (Aloisi & Stefano, 2022; Lata et al., 2023). While workers can technically choose when to work, their earning capacity is often tied to customer demand and platform incentives and penalties. Specifically, they are encouraged to work during peak hours through surge pricing and bonus schemes, while declining deliveries may reduce their access to future order allocation priority (Lata et al., 2023; Wang & Churchill, 2025). These mechanisms compel workers to work longer hours when demand is higher to achieve a viable income. According to a Transport Workers' Union survey of over 1,000 transport platform workers, 41% reported working more than 40 hours per week, while 69% felt compelled to work at peak hours to maintain earnings (Transport Workers' Union, 2023).

Labour control is also embedded in the design of algorithmic management systems, which govern order dispatch and allocation and monitor performance metrics (Lata et al., 2023). While the work practices of different platforms somewhat vary, workers' continued access to

these platforms is often contingent on meeting opaque performance benchmarks, with job security heavily reliant on maintaining high ratings and customer satisfaction (Healy & Pekarek, 2025; Veen et al., 2020, 2025). Ratings and customer reviews thus function as tools of indirect control, pressuring workers to engage in emotional labour (Riordan et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2021). This is further exacerbated by the economic precarity of platform work. According to the same Transport Workers' Union survey, 81% of transport platform workers relied on this job as their primary source of income, but at least 45% earned less than the minimum wage (Transport Workers' Union, 2023).

Moreover, food-delivery workers often engage in unsafe practices, such as speeding to meet delivery timeframes and maximise earnings (Orr et al., 2023). These practices have contributed to a growing number of injuries and fatalities in the food-delivery sector. By 2024, at least 18 rider deaths and over 900 injuries had been documented since 2017, and five food-delivery riders died within 2 months in late 2020 (Hatch, 2023; Transport Workers' Union, 2024), raising public concerns over platform work safety and workers' health and safety issues.

In sum, the labour process of food-delivery work is often characterised by economic insecurity, digital surveillance and heightened safety risks, contributing to workers' structural vulnerabilities (Lata et al., 2023; Veen et al., 2020; Wang & Churchill, 2025). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for explaining both the appeal of platform work to migrant workers and the institutional constraints they encounter when they exercise agency within it.

Overrepresentation of migrants on food-delivery platforms

In Australia, food-delivery platform work is disproportionately undertaken by temporary migrant workers. A national survey conducted in 2019 found that international temporary migrants were

three times more likely than Australian citizens to participate in on-demand platform work (McDonald et al., 2019). This demographic trend has remained consistent in more recent survey in 2023 (Williams et al., 2025). The dominance of migrant workers is also evident in the emergence of niche platforms such as Hungry Panda, which specifically cater to ethnic restaurants and customers, and recruit workers from the same ethnic communities (Sun et al., 2025).

The overrepresentation of migrants in platform work is shaped by Australia's labour migration regime, including its visa restrictions and institutional constraints on temporary migrants (Riordan et al., 2023). With working rights restrictions (e.g., work hour limits), and limited access to social welfare entitlements, temporary migrants are often engaged in informal, low-wage insecure jobs in low-skilled sectors (Clibborn & Wright, 2020, 2022). Meanwhile, structural barriers such as limited language proficiency, lack of local networks, and labour market discrimination further constrain their job choices (Clibborn, 2021; Van Den Broek et al., 2021). In this context, food-delivery platform work is appealing due to its low entry barriers, flexibility, and minimal educational or language requirements (Veen et al., 2020). Additionally, the rudimentary architecture and lax compliance regimes of emerging food-delivery platforms (e.g., Hungry Panda) have enabled migrant workers to bend and break visa restrictions to extend their stay and/or increase economic gain (Sun et al., 2025). However, migrant platform workers are often caught in a form of 'hyper-precarity', shaped by the intersection of their temporary migrant status and the contractual exclusion from employment rights as platform workers (Mendonça et al., 2023; Zou, 2015). For instance, while migrant platform workers are excluded from employment protections such as healthcare, algorithmic management and incentives mechanisms encourage many workers to prioritise earnings over safety, producing what has been

termed *platform-induced necropower* – a condition in which surviving economically requires risking one’s physical wellbeing (Orr et al., 2023; Wang & Churchill, 2025).

In sum, these dynamics highlight how the development of food-delivery platform work in Australia is deeply intertwined with the structure of its labour migration regime and regulatory framework. The marginal positioning of migrant workers within the broader labour market, combined with the state’s limited regulation and protection of platform labour, has made food-delivery work both a viable surviving strategy and a site of intensified precarity. By situating migrant platform workers within this institutional and policy context, this section provides a good understanding of the structural conditions that shape migrants’ work experiences, constrain their rights and protections, and influence the forms of agency they are able to exercise in response to platform work precarity.

5.4.2 Food-delivery platform work in China

The on-demand platform economy in China has grown rapidly over the past decade, becoming an important source of employment and facilitating economic development (Liu et al., 2020). In 2020, approximately 84 million people participated as service providers in the Chinese platform economy, up from 50 million in 2015, representing an increase from 6.5% to 10.8% of total national employment (State Information Centre, 2021). Among the various forms of digital labour, app-based on-demand work, such as ride-hailing and food-delivery, dominates the sector. By 2021, Meituan, the leading food-delivery platform, reported it had 7.7 million registered couriers (Xie, 2022). In terms of market concentration, Meituan dominates the food-delivery market with approximately 65% of the market share, followed by Ele.me with around 33% (Statista, 2025). These food-delivery platforms often operate under a mix of two different

business models: franchise cooperation, in which platforms outsource operations to intermediary firms or franchisees who manage recruitment and supervision; and crowdsourcing, which mobilises independent workers via digital interfaces and treats them as self-employed workers (Zhou, 2020). Workers in both models sign labour service contracts rather than formal labour contracts, resulting in their *de facto* exclusion from standard employment protections, which is further explored below (Zhou, 2020).

The Chinese government has increasingly relied on the platform economy as a strategic solution to absorb surplus labour, especially among rural migrants and underemployed labour (Chang & Huang, 2023; Lei, 2021). The appeal of platform work in China also lies in its relatively high earnings compared to other blue-collar occupations. In 2024, the average monthly income of couriers was ¥7,496, which is about 22% higher than the overall blue-collar average of ¥6,150. High frequency riders, who work more than 22 days a month and average 6 hours per day, earned between ¥6,650 and ¥9,344 monthly, significantly exceeding the minimum monthly wage of ¥2,500 in Guangzhou (China New Employment Forms Research Centre, 2025).

Compared with Australia, where food-delivery workers typically earn below the national minimum wage (see Section 5.4.1), Chinese food-delivery work appears more financially attractive when assessed against minimum income benchmarks. However, these comparatively higher earnings are closely tied to extended and intensive working hours, with many riders engaging in delivery work for over 10 hours (Kubota, 2025; Mao, 2025). Thus, rather than indicating inherently superior working conditions, these earnings reflect a trade-off in which workers exchange long working hours for higher overall pay. This helps explain a slightly different motivational dynamic in that while international migrant workers in Australia often enter platform work due to constrained labour market opportunities and limited job alternatives,

many workers in China are drawn to food-delivery work because it represents one of the better-paying options within a highly stratified blue-collar labour market.

Consequently, economic considerations remain the primary driver of engagement in platform work (Sun et al., 2023), with 63% of food-delivery workers reporting that this work helps increase their income (Meituan Research Institute, 2018). Moreover, a report indicated that a substantial proportion of food-delivery workers (74.5%) engaged in it full-time and are economically dependent on it, with around 16% of them earning over 90% of their household income from this job (Meituan Research Institute, 2018; Zhou, 2020). These figures suggest that despite platform work being portrayed as supplementary or flexible, a significant number of workers are highly reliant on it, which in turn reinforces their economic insecurity because of its unstable income and limited employment protections (Chen, 2020).

Legal classification and regulatory framework

In China, on-demand platform workers, including food-delivery workers, are generally not recognised as employees under labour law. Instead, they are classified as *self-employed workers* or *independent contractors*, usually operating under labour service contracts rather than formal labour contracts (Xie, 2022; Zheng & Su, 2023). This classification excludes them from employment protections, such as regulated working hours, minimum wage, and social insurance coverage (Zhang & Yan, 2024; Zhou, 2020). According to the Annual Report on the Development of China's Sharing Economy, over 90% of platform workers had either signed contracts or agreements falling outside the labour law's scope or had not signed any contracts at all (State Information Centre, 2021). In the food-delivery sector, this legal ambiguity is exacerbated by the platforms' outsourcing business models, particularly the reliance on

intermediary companies to manage workers, which shifts employment responsibilities to third-party agencies and further obscures the employment relationship (Yang, 2024; Zhang & Yan, 2024).

Chinese courts play a central role in determining whether an employment relationship exists by applying a two-part subordination test, which considers whether the worker is subject to employer-formulated rules and managerial control, and whether the service provided is integral to the employer's business. (Xie, 2022). In practice, courts have remained cautious in recognising platform workers as employees. For instance, in many recent cases involving ride-hailing platform Didi, courts declined to recognise formal employment relationships, citing insufficient subordination in such cases (Xie, 2022; Zheng & Su, 2023). Yet, there have also been attempts to reinterpret legal standards in response to algorithmic management. In the 2018 case of *Li v. FlashEx*, the Beijing court acknowledged the platform's algorithmic control and surveillance as a form of indirect subordination, thereby recognising the workers' employee status (Xie, 2022). While this decision was praised for its novelty and alignment with workers' practical circumstances, its impact remains limited, as similar reasoning has not been widely adopted in subsequent rulings (Lin, 2022; Xie, 2022).

Alongside the legal ambiguity, trade union representation and social protections for platform workers remain highly constrained. A 2017 All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) survey found that 21% of full-time platform workers were union members (Zhou, 2020). While the ACFTU and its local branches have initiated outreach programs targeting platform workers since 2021, unionisation efforts in China remain largely symbolic and ineffective in practice (China Labour Bulletin, 2023). The highly dispersed and outsourced nature of food-delivery work, combined with weak institutional support from unions, continues

to undermine workers' efforts at collective organising and bargaining (Xie, 2022; Zhu et al., 2011). Social insurance coverage is similarly limited for platform workers because their classification as independent contractors excludes them from employer-provided insurance schemes, including work injury compensation (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Xie, 2022). In recent years, the Chinese government has made tentative moves to address these gaps. Most notably, the 'Guiding Opinions on Protecting the Labour and Social Security Rights and Interests of Workers in New Forms of Employment' issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, introduced the concept of an "incomplete employment relationship", advocating for a third category of worker between traditional employees and contractors (Lin, 2022; Xie, 2022). This initiative, despite being non-compulsory and not legally binding, is similar to Australia's recent recognition of 'employee-like workers' and signals a partial shift towards expanded protections (Fair Work Commission, n.d.; Xie, 2022).

Overall, the legal and regulatory landscape in China continues to prioritise platform economy growth while offering only limited protections to workers. While some judicial and administrative innovations have emerged, the prevailing classification of platform workers as non-employees under labour service contracts, the weak institutional mechanisms for collective representation, and the lack of comprehensive social protection all constrain workers' ability to exercise meaningful labour agency (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Jiang et al., 2018; Xie, 2022). These legal ambiguities and regulatory gaps not only reflect the fragmented nature of labour governance in China's platform economy, but also intersect with the broader institutional architecture of labour migration regime, where rural-to-urban migrants are systematically excluded from full urban citizenship (Chan, 2019; Chen et al., 2024). Understanding these

structural conditions is crucial for interpreting how Chinese migrant workers navigate, adapt to, or resist the constraints imposed by both the platforms and the labour migration regime.

Work organisation of food-delivery platforms

The organisation of food-delivery work in China is characterised by a system that combines crowdsourced (i.e. *zhongbao*) and outsourced (i.e. *zhuansong*) arrangements, both of which are relevant to this study as participants were engaged in both types.. This hybrid platform regime enables platforms to expand their reach while maintaining flexibility and operational control (Yang, 2024). In the crowdsourcing (*zhongbao*) model, workers are treated as independent contractors, signing labour service contracts with subcontracted labour service companies that operate at arm's length from the platform itself (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Wei et al., 2022). These workers primarily interact with algorithmic systems that dispatch orders and assess their performance. Their experience closely mirrors the algorithmic on-demand platform work model used by Uber Eats and Deliveroo in countries like Australia and the UK (Mendonça et al., 2023; Veen et al., 2020). By contrast, *zhuansong* (outsourced) riders operate within a more hierarchical, outsourced framework, in which platforms delegate labour recruitment and frontline management to franchisees or third-party staffing agencies, who thus establish service stations based on geographical areas to directly manage workers (Wei et al., 2022; Yang, 2024). Although these workers are quasi-employees in practice – receiving route assignments, manual order distributions, and physical oversight through service stations – they rarely have formal labour contracts with the third-party staffing agencies (Lin, 2022; Zhou, 2020). Therefore, the outsourced model supplies platforms with a more stable and controllable workforce, while the crowdsourced model offers flexibility, enabling platforms to achieve more efficient operations (Yang, 2024).

The two models further generate different worker experiences in terms of their autonomy, income stability, working hours and managerial oversight, with detail shown in Table 5.1. Specifically, crowdsourced (*zhongbao*) riders experience high nominal autonomy as they can log on and off the platform freely, choose their work location, and have minimal face-to-face interaction with human managers. However, in practice, this autonomy is largely constrained by algorithmic controls that govern order dispatch, performance ratings and penalties (Sun, 2019; van Doorn & Chen, 2021). In contrast, outsourced (*zhuansong*) riders are subject to stricter scheduling and supervision, which reduces their spatial and temporal flexibility but offers more predictable income, emotional support and access to human mediation when conflicts arise (Lei, 2021; Yang, 2024). As for the impacts on workers' collective agency, while outsourced workers benefit from physical proximity and stable peer networks through service stations, which may facilitate informal communication and small-scale resistance, their access to overt collective mobilisation is still constrained by the surveillance and closer communication with service station management embedded in subcontracting structure (Liu & Friedman, 2021). In contrast, the more dispersed crowdsourced workers lack daily interaction but may exploit the flexibility to initiate protests and mobilise solidarity (Lei, 2021).

Despite these operational differences, *zhongbao* and *zhuansong* workers share some common structural vulnerability embedded in platform design. Both are subject to stringent and opaque algorithmic governance that determines their work availability, earnings potential and ratings (Lei, 2021; Sun, 2019). Customer reviews and ratings are central to both systems, pressuring workers to prioritise speed and compliance over safety and wellbeing (Li, 2021; Sun et al., 2023). Even where service stations offer support to *zhuansong* workers, such interventions are ad hoc and insufficient to offset the structural power asymmetry in platform organisation (Li,

2021; Yang, 2024). Furthermore, both models reveal that platforms strategically obscure employment relationships through either outsourcing or subcontracting, thereby evading accountability for social insurance, or protections for work-related injuries, thus further exposing workers to precarity (Lei, 2021; Lin, 2022; Xie, 2022). As such, the bifurcated system demonstrates a convergence in managerial rationality, with both models functioning as an infrastructure for labour extraction while minimising legal responsibility.

Table 5.1: Summary of the two models in food-delivery platform regimes in China

	众包 Zhongbao (crowdsourced)	专送 Zhuansong (outsourced)
Legal status	Independent contractors who sign labour service contract with labour service companies	Quasi-self-employed; or labour service contract with third-party staffing agencies or franchisees; multi-tiered contracting structures
Organisational and management mechanism	Mainly algorithmic management; little to no interaction with human managers	Hybrid: Algorithmic management + human supervision via ‘service stations’ (e.g., dispatch orders, adjust delivery routes, deal with conflicts arising from algorithms or customer ratings)
Income	Variable piece-rate income	Base pay + fixed piece-rate; more stable income due to order assignment system by service station
Working hours	Flexible, log in/off freely	Less flexible, work schedules being managed – must be active during peak hours; usually at least 8 hours; daily check-ins in the morning
Spatial mobility	High: choose where to work	Low: workers often bound to specific districts tied to a service station
Conflict resolution	Individualised, difficult to access redress	Managed via service stations, but often lacking formal grievance mechanisms
Access to tools and equipment	Self-provided	Provided by service stations
Labour protection (welfare entitlements): exposure to risks	Minimal, not entitled to labour law protections	Some basic protections but informally provided; still legally unprotected under labour law
Autonomy	High in theory, but limited in practice due to algorithmic management	Low: workers must report physically or virtually to service stations and follow set protocols
Worker collective action	More frequent, despite facing higher barriers to collective action; Spontaneous and disruptive collective mobilisation enabled by lack of direct supervision	Less frequent, service station constrains grievances and reduce the spaces for collective contention; Organised actions are often channelled through negotiation or small-scale discontent with station

		managers, rather than overt disruption towards platforms.
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Overrepresentation of rural migrants on food-delivery platforms

According to reports released by major food-delivery platforms Meituan and Ele.me, approximately 80% of food-delivery workers are rural-to-urban migrants (Lin, 2025; Liu & Friedman, 2021). This reflects China’s stratified labour migration regime, in which the *hukou* system continues to constrain rural migrants’ upward mobility, leaving them concentrated in low-skilled informal sectors with limited access to social welfare entitlements (Jiang et al., 2018; Swider, 2015). In this context, food-delivery work emerges as a structurally accessible job with several advantages compared to other low-skilled jobs available to them. While rural migrants are aware of the risks and lack of protections associated with food-delivery work, they nonetheless prefer undertaking this job over factory work in manufacturing, which is widely regarded as monotonous, spatially confined, and dominated by rigid managerial control (Lin, 2025; Ngai, 2004; Ngai & Chan, 2012). In comparison to factory work, food-delivery work offers higher level of autonomy and dignity through flexible scheduling, and minimal in-person supervision, and is therefore regarded as the ‘lesser of two evils’ (Lin, 2025). It is also attractive for its relatively low barriers to entry, making it one of the few viable options for less educated migrants, or those lacking personal connections in the city (Sun & Zhao, 2024). Food-delivery work also has relatively high income when compared to other blue-collar occupations (China New Employment Forms Research Centre, 2025). For rural migrants seeking to send remittance back home or sustain themselves in cities, this earning potential makes platform work an appealing, if precarious, livelihood strategy. In sum, their participation in food-delivery is shaped by economic necessity, structural exclusion, and the relative unattractiveness of alternative jobs.

Despite these perceived advantages, rural migrants in platform work are considered as hyper-precarious as both rural migrants and informal workers (Sun & Zhao, 2024; Zou, 2015). The lack of formal labour contracts, minimal access to social insurance schemes, and weak institutional support leave them with limited recourse in the event of injury, wage disputes, or platform deactivation (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Xie, 2022; Zhou, 2020). Algorithmic management systems further intensify their vulnerability by operating with little transparency, including in dispatching deliveries, monitoring performance and imposing penalties (Sun, 2019). Moreover, as Sun and Zhao (2024) argued, platform architecture itself reinforces migrant platform workers' social distinction and marginalisation in the labour market because they are often socially discriminated by customers, spatially and culturally segregated from local urban residents, leading to their subordinate and marginalised positions with limited agency capacities in the urban labour market.

5.5 Summary

This chapter has mapped the institutional contexts under which migrant workers engage in food-delivery platform work in Australia and China. It has shown that, despite operating within different national regimes – Australia's temporary international migration regime and China's *hukou*-based internal migration regime – migrant workers' rights, mobility, and access to social protection are institutionally constrained in both countries. In Australia, the proliferation of temporary migration has created a stratified system in which most migrant workers have limited pathways to permanent residency, lack bargaining power, and are disproportionately funnelled into insecure, low-paid sectors. In China, the persistence of the rural-urban *hukou* divide relegates rural migrants to marginalised labour market positions, restricting their access to urban

welfare and upward mobility even after long-term urban residence. Both regimes not only determine how migrants enter and stay in the host labour markets but also shape the degree of agency they can exercise when they are embedded in precarious forms of work, such as platform work.

The chapter has also demonstrated how the rapid expansion of on-demand food-delivery platforms in both countries has been facilitated by institutional environments that prioritise labour flexibility, regulatory evasion and digital innovation (McDonald et al., 2019; Zhou, 2020). Despite surface-level differences, notably Australia's reliance on independent contracting versus China's hybrid outsourcing and crowdsourcing models, food-delivery platforms in both countries systematically circumvent employer responsibilities through legal ambiguity and subcontracting arrangements (Forsyth, 2020; Muldoon & Sun, 2024; Stewart & Stanford, 2017). These organisational structures obscure employment relationship and limit workers' access to social protections (Sun, 2019; Veen et al., 2020). As a result, migrant workers, who are overrepresented in this sector, face compounded vulnerabilities as both temporary migrants and precarious platform workers. Their platform work experience is often characterised by low bargaining power, limited institutional protections, and high exposure to occupational risks (Orr et al., 2023; Sun & Zhao, 2024).

By analysing the intersection of labour migration regimes, regulatory framework of platform work and food-delivery platform organisation, this chapter has laid the groundwork for understanding the constrained structural conditions that migrant food-delivery workers navigate. These contextual dynamics are critical for interpreting the different expressions of agency – resilience, reworking, and resistance – that the following chapters explore in greater depth.

CHAPTER 6 Findings on Case A – Australia

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the motivations, temporal horizons, work experiences and agency expressions of international temporary migrants working in Australia's platform economy. Drawing on interviews with food-delivery migrant workers, this chapter examines how they navigate work and migration-related constraints, with a particular focus on the interaction between precarious work conditions, the regulatory framework of Australia's labour migration regime, and workers agency behaviours.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 6.2 and 6.3 analyses migrants' motivations and temporal orientations, highlighting diverse migration trajectories and their shifting aspirations. Section 6.4 outlines their everyday work experiences, including pay structures, working hours and occupational risks, and Section 6.5 turns to the challenges imposed by labour migration rules, limited working rights, and language barriers in their migration lives. These contextual factors frame the analysis of agency in the second half of the chapter. Section 6.6 to 6.8 examine how migrant platform workers express resilience through coping and meaning-making strategies; reworking through tactical income maximisation and legal status manoeuvring; and resistance through informal practices that circumvent work and migration rules. In sum, these findings show how international migrants engage with precarious platform work and migration life within, and sometimes beyond, the constraints of Australia's labour migration regime.

6.2 Motivations of international migrants

Understanding the motivations that drive international migrants to Australia provides crucial insights into their diverse experiences and decision-making processes relating to food-delivery platform work. These motivations are essential for understanding how migrants navigate the connection between their temporal horizons, work experiences and agency practices within the host environment. By examining why individuals choose to migrate, we can better understand the agency they exhibit in shaping their lives under the new social, economic, and regulatory frameworks they encounter. This section analyses the various reasons that drive individuals to move to Australia, including economic prospects, educational opportunities, and the pursuit of personal growth and experiences. These factors influence not only their initial migration decisions but also their long-term goals and strategies they employ to navigate working life in Australia.

A predominant motivation for labour migration to Australia is the pursuit of better economic opportunities. Many migrants in this study were drawn by the potential to earn significantly higher incomes compared to their home countries, facilitated by favourable currency exchange rates and more stable economic conditions. For example, one migrant from Turkey highlighted the economic instability in his home country exacerbated by the pandemic and thus decided to leave to make money: *“After the pandemic, many third-world countries are sinking into debt. Turkey is no exception with inflation soaring to 200%. It became so hard to earn a good living in Turkey, so many people left, including me.”* (AU Interviewee 14).

Similarly, migrants from China found Australia’s job market more lucrative: *“The main reason I came here is to make money. I can save up to ¥300k in one year here, which would take 3 to 4 years [to earn as much] back home.”* (AU Interviewee 2).

Education is a significant catalyst for international migrants in Australia. These educational endeavours typically fell into two distinct categories in this study: those pursuing tertiary degrees and those focusing on professional skill enhancement, including language proficiency. The first group consisted of students enrolled in universities or colleges to attain higher degrees, which they perceived as a pathway to better career opportunities and personal growth within a global context. An interviewee illustrated this, stating, *“I am here to complete my master’s degree, as I believe that the degree obtained in Australia will open doors to career opportunities internationally that are not available in my home country.”* (AU Interviewee 6). Meanwhile, the second group included students who primarily seek to enhance specific professional skills or improve their English to boost their employability. This subgroup often used vocational and language courses as a practical approach to upskilling. One migrant shared his motivation for coming to Australia, *“I joined a language school to improve my English while simultaneously advancing in my professional skill in electrical and electronics. I want to find an internship here in this field, so that I can probably find better jobs when I go back to Europe.”* (AU Interviewee 14). By navigating these educational pathways, some migrants actively engaged in strategies for long-term residency and integration into Australian society.

Exploring new lifestyles and gaining different life experiences are motivations for some migrants. In this study, the allure of living abroad and experiencing a culture distinct from their own drove many individuals to seek new adventures in Australia, particularly for those who have had dreams of going abroad. A worker vividly illustrated this motivation:

“Since I was young, I’ve been fascinated by foreign movies. They sparked my dream of going abroad, even just for travelling. Initially, I planned to go to the US, but getting a visa is hard, which redirected me to Australia. This change didn’t dampen my

enthusiasm. Instead, it offered me an opportunity to see the world and lifestyle I had always imagined.” (AU Interviewee 9)

This sentiment was echoed by another migrant from France, who expressed a desire to escape the monotony of his life and seek challenges that could facilitate personal growth and independence. He explained how he was able to escape from the routine by leaving the country and coming to Australia: *“I was doing sports, but life became predictably repetitive. I yearned for something challenging to step outside my comfort zone, to live independently...Coming to Australia was more than changing locations.” (AU Interviewee 26).* These narratives underscore a broader theme among migrants who viewed moving to Australia not merely as a change of living spaces but as a transformative journey. This pursuit of a new lifestyle is often interwoven with their aspirations for personal development, highlighting how migration is as much about personal fulfillment as economic or educational opportunities.

Many migrants’ motivations were multifaceted, overlapping across economic, educational, and personal development spheres, and their initial motivations could shift. What started as an educational journey can morph into a desire for permanent settlement driven by attractive work opportunities and/or lifestyles. This highlights the dynamic nature of migration, where initial intentions can evolve in response to new opportunities and changing personal aspirations within the host environment, influencing the adaptive strategies migrant workers employ as they navigate working life in the host country.

6.3 Temporal horizons of international migrants

In examining the temporal horizons of international migrants in Australia, their outlooks aligned closely with their visa status and future plans, to some extent echoing their motivations for

migration. Migrants in this study can be categorised into three distinct groups based on their intended duration of stay and short-term or long-term aspirations, illustrating how these temporal horizons influenced their engagement in work and broader agency strategies.

The first category consisted of migrants who held temporary visas, such as working holiday visas or international student visas, with a definitive plan to return to their home countries upon the expiry of their visas or completion of their studies. These migrants viewed their time in Australia as time-bounded, and as an opportunity to learn skills, or earn money before returning home. For instance, one migrant reflected on his course as instrumental for his career back home: *“After I finish my degree at the end of this year, I will return home and start working.”* (AU Interviewee 25). This group’s stay was characterised by a clear-cut temporal boundary defined by the visa conditions, conveying the transitional nature of their stay.

The second category included those on temporary visas who did not have a fixed plan on when they would return to their home countries. Their stay was characterised by uncertainty and was contingent on the chances of renewing of their visas. This group used their time in Australia to accumulate financial resources that could enhance their living standards when they eventually return home. The uncertainty of their plans often resulted in a tactical approach to employment. One interviewee expressed this sentiment, stating, *“I’m here to make money; I’ll return home once I save enough money. I’m not planning on getting a permanent residency, but I don’t know when I will leave yet. I’m currently on a bridging visa which doesn’t restrict my length of stay.”* (AU Interviewee 3).

The third category consisted of migrants who held temporary visas but actively sought to extend their stay or obtain permanent residency. This group’s temporal horizons were more rooted in the long-term, aiming to settle permanently in Australia. For example, one participant

discussed his strategic educational choices to facilitate his migration goals: *“I am going to do a degree in social work major for 1-2 years to gain additional points for immigration purposes.”* (AU Interviewee 8). Another migrant explained his plan for applying for permanent residency through his child: *“My child was born here, and there’s a rule that children born in this country can obtain permanent residency (PR) after 8 years.”^{vii} He is 4 years old now, so we need to wait for another 4 years before we can apply for PR as his parent.”* (AU Interviewee 18).

The temporal horizons of international migrants were, to some extent, shaped by their motivations for migration, but the relationship was neither linear nor uniform. Many migrants motivated by financial gains (e.g., AU interviewees 1, 3, 4, 10, 17, and 21) exhibited shorter-term or uncertain temporal horizons, often aiming to accumulate savings before returning home. Among those who migrated for education or skill enhancement, some had long-term aspirations from the outset and chose study programs aligned with skilled migration pathways (e.g. AU Interviewee 8 and 27), while others arrived with short-term goals, which may shift towards permanency as opportunities arise, or life circumstances evolve. An illustrative example was an interviewee whose initial education journey expanded into family settlement plans after he established his family and had a child born in Australia. Similarly, migrants seeking lifestyle changes, particularly those on working holiday visas (e.g., AU Interviewee 9), often arrived with a fixed, time-bounded plan, but their temporal orientations may also shift as they re-evaluated their future prospects. The shifting in temporal orientations from temporary to longer term was particularly evident among migrants who became more embedded in local community through

^{vii} This is an incorrect understanding of the migration rule. In the Australian Citizenship Act, a child born in Australia is an Australian citizen if the child has been living in Australia for a period of 10 years from the day they were born.

deeper social or professional connections. Thus, the interaction between migrants' motivations and temporal horizons is dynamic and context-dependent.

Australia's labour migration regime, including visa conditions, renewal rules and pathways to permanent residency, play a critical role in shaping the viable options to migrants, as well as their temporal orientations. One return-oriented migrant, for example, explained: "*My course doesn't help me with getting PR, so there's no point applying for the Graduate Visa to stay for just another 2 years.*" (AU Interviewee 15). Another student migrant also reflected on the impacts of changing migration policies on her long-term aspirations:

"When I decided to study accounting abroad a few years ago, I was told by the agent that it was not that hard to get a permanent residency...but then it turned out that it is extremely hard to get it through being an 'accountant', that's why I am studying early childhood education now." (AU Interviewee 16)

Migrants with uncertain outlooks were particularly vulnerable to institutional constraints, with their stay often dependent on "*whether the visa gets renewed or not*" (AU Interviewee 12).

These findings demonstrate that even among migrants with similar temporal horizons, their underlying motivations, migration trajectories, and perceived options could differ substantially. For instance, a return-oriented migrant may leave due to personal life planning, visa-based uncertainty, or institutional exclusion. Conversely, migrants with long-term aspirations may still confront constrained pathways due to shifting migration policies or eligibility thresholds. In this context, migrants are often required to remain flexible, recalibrating their life plans in response to structural changes beyond their control.

In sum, motivations for migration, temporal horizons and institutional structures were mutually constitutive, shaping how migrants perceived their time in Australia, and the forms of

agency they exhibited in navigating both the opportunities and constraints in their work and migration lives. These dynamics are further explored in detail in the following sections.

6.4 Work experiences of migrant workers

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of migrant workers' agency practices in the host labour market, this section examines their work experiences, particularly the engagement with food-delivery platforms.

For the majority of participants (20 out of 30), food-delivery work was their primary source of income. Compensation for food-delivery workers is based on a piece-rate system per order, with potential bonuses awarded for completing a specified number of orders. According to interviewees, the hourly earnings often ranged from A\$25 to A\$35, depending on the customer demand and the varying reward program available each week. One interviewee emphasised: *“The bonus is the most important component of my income... if you don't consider any rewards, the hourly wage might only be around A\$10 or so.”* (AU Interviewee 19). Additionally, many workers described this income as “unstable”, especially during school holidays due to diminished consumer demand especially from international students. For instance, an interviewee noted that: *“in December and January, the hourly rate went down to A\$10–15 as the international students returned home. There are not many orders for us...it is quite tough during that time.”* (AU Interviewee 20). One participant further explained that he felt insecure and viewed the inconsistency of earnings as a major drawback of this job:

“The downside of this job is that it's not giving you a consistent income. I earned over A\$300 on this Monday, but it doesn't mean that I can earn that much every day. Every day is a different story. It depends on the market.” (AU Interviewee 27)

While most food-delivery workers felt satisfied with their income levels, they also emphasised the excessively long working hours required to boost their earnings, ranging from 8 to 12 hours daily for those doing food-delivery as the only source of income. An interviewee, for instance, set a weekly goal for himself: *“it is A\$1000 per week. If I don’t [reach] this goal, I work at the weekend. Last week, I did 12 hours on Saturday.”* (AU Interviewee 26).

Building on the examination of pay and work hours, the work experiences of platform workers reveal significant concerns over their physical and mental wellbeing. First, food-delivery work involved high levels of physical exertion as workers spent extensive periods riding or driving. This exposure also increased the risk of accidents, with considerable health and safety risks. Several interviewees reported experiences of road accidents or injuries during the delivery work. As explained by one:

“When delivering meals, the traffic can sometimes be very congested, which is really annoying. The customers are rushing the orders, which makes me particularly irritated. Staying focused for such a long time is tiring. Also, riding a motorcycle is very dangerous. I’ve fallen off five or six times since I started doing this job.” (AU Interviewee 1)

Another worker described these accidents as “inevitable”, explaining, *“we spend 8 to 9 hours daily on the streets, and we are racing against time, which is particularly dangerous on rainy days.”* (AU Interviewee 28).

Second, the role of food-delivery workers entailed considerable emotional labour, with many reporting instances of disrespect from customers that negatively impacted their overall job satisfaction. One worker expressed frustration with customer interactions: *“I don’t enjoy this job when the customer is difficult. I think the most difficult thing in delivery is to not [get] angry.”*

Sometimes they are very rude, showing no respect to us” (AU Interviewee 26). This sentiment was echoed by another worker: *“The part I dislike is often not being respected by others... They don’t answer the doorbell or your calls, and when you leave the food downstairs, they might file a complaint on you.”* (AU Interviewee 20). These experiences underscore the significant emotional demands placed on food-delivery workers, compounding the challenges they faced in their day-to-day activities.

In sum, the work experiences of migrant food-delivery workers in Australia were characterised by unstable income, long hours, physical risks and emotional strain. While some migrants valued the flexibility and earning potential of platform work, these benefits were often offset by precarity, long work hours, and a lack of respect and worker protections. These everyday work experiences formed the structural conditions within which migrants must navigate. The following sections examine how migrant workers responded to these challenges by exercising varied forms of agency to cope with, adjust to, and contest the conditions of platform work.

6.5 Migration-related challenges

In addition to the precarious work conditions, migrant workers in Australia are subject to structural constraints in the labour market that stem from their visa status and the broader labour migration regime governing their entry and stay. These regulations often restrict the types of jobs, rights and protections migrants can access, and the number of hours they can work. For instance, student visa holders are subject to strict work hour limits, which exclude them from many formal or career-building roles. As one student migrant explained: *“Jobs like entering a company, being a white-collar worker are not available to people like me on a student visa.*

There is working hour restrictions on us, so we just don't qualify for those positions." (AU Interviewee 16). This migration framework narrows student migrants' job options, and reinforces their concentration in low-paid, informal or precarious work. Another student visa holder shared: *"With my visa, I can only do casual or cash-in-hand jobs. That usually means restaurants, supermarket shelf-packing, or delivery. It's not ideal, but that's what I can do to make some money."* (AU Interviewee 25).

For some migrants, these constraints were compounded by the non-recognition of overseas qualifications and the reluctance of employers to hire temporary residents. For instance, a former industrial engineer and ISO system supervisor in the Philippines, explained his frustration in the job-finding process:

"I've got years of experience managing manufacturing processes and the ISO systems, but none of it seems to matter here. I tried applying for similar roles as part-time work, but they all said you need a permanent residency or full working rights. Employers won't consider a student like me, even if I'm qualified." (AU Interviewee 27)

His experience illustrates how skilled migrants were excluded from employment that matched their qualifications and skills due to institutional barriers tied to migrant status. These narratives reveal a broader pattern in which visa-based restrictions and labour market segmentation may channel educated and experienced migrants into low-wage sectors with little upward mobility.

Beyond visa-based constraints, language proficiency is another barrier, significantly influencing job accessibility for migrant workers in Australia. Many migrants in this study considered limited English language skills as a primary obstacle in securing employment that required effective communication in English or that aligned with their qualifications and aspirations. Several workers from China noted that their limited language capability confined

them to work in Chinese restaurants, often associated with low pay. As one worker explained: *“I worked in a few different Chinese restaurants since I came here because I can barely speak English, and those local restaurants just won’t hire me.”* (AU Interviewee 29). For migrants with professional backgrounds, language requirements were often a significant barrier to the recognition of credentials and employment in their field. For example, one engineer shared his experience, stating, *“The first obstacle is the IELTS [International English Language Testing System], I need to get [an IELTS score of] 6 to get the Australian engineering certification, and approval for my degree. After that, maybe I can apply for jobs, as a real engineer here.”* (AU Interviewee 14). Language barriers thus delayed or even prevented skilled migrants from entering the professional fields, forcing them to seek alternatives, often less qualified roles in the host labour market.

The migration regulations governing temporary visas, compounded by linguistic barriers, often confined these workers to informal, low-skilled and precarious sectors such as food-delivery, hospitality, farm work and construction. For instance, a worker from Taiwan who has been working in Australia for nearly 10 years, illustrated this limited spectrum of employment opportunities: *“I’ve tried almost every job I can do since I came here, including cooking in restaurants, working on construction sites, on farms and in manufacturing plants, and now, delivering food. These are almost all the job options I have.”* (AU Interviewee 1).

Language barriers extend beyond the workplace, affecting migrant workers’ social interactions in Australia. Many interviewees noted that their limited English proficiency made it challenging to form meaningful connections with local residents, often leaving them socially isolated. For example, an interviewee shared his struggles in navigating everyday conversations and emotional expressions: *“Sometimes they use idioms or jokes I don’t understand. I don’t*

know the culture well either. And when I'm upset, it's hard to explain how I feel. I can't express myself, and they can't really understand me" (AU Interviewee 18).

Many migrants relied heavily on co-ethnic friends or communities, which played an ambivalent role in shaping their experiences. On one hand, co-ethnic networks facilitated initial settlement and provided practical assistance with housing and job-finding. As a migrant recalled, *"I knew him before I came to Australia, and he got me into this job. He is a quite well-known rider on TikTok. Thanks to him, I had a place to stay as soon as I arrived, and now we share a house"* (AU Interviewee 21). However, he also reflected on how this co-ethnic environment limited his exposure to the broader Australian society:

"He introduced me to all his friends here, and we hang out almost every day. Sometimes, it feels like I am still in China as I did not speak English at all for the first 2 months. I feel comfortable and easy, but since I am abroad, I do think I should be picking up some English." (AU Interviewee 21)

This cultural enclosure, while emotionally reassuring, may therefore act as a barrier, preventing migrants from engaging with the broader community and reinforcing their marginalised status within Australian society.

In sum, findings illustrate that the challenges faced by migrant workers in Australia were shaped by the intersecting effects of visa regulations, labour market segmentation and linguistic barriers. These structural constraints limited migrants' access to stable, secure, and upwardly mobile employment, often confining them to low-wage, informal sectors. Beyond the workplace, these challenges also hindered social integration, reinforcing migrants' marginalised position in society. The following sections analyse how migrant platform workers responded to these

constraints through diverse expressions of agency based on Katz's (2004) agency framework of resilience, reworking and resistance.

6.6 Resilience

6.6.1 Work-related resilience

With reference to Katz's agency categorisation, resilience among migrant workers in platform work is characterised by a range of subtle, everyday practices aimed at navigating and coping with adverse work conditions without challenging existing social relations (Katz, 2004). First, a prevalent resilience practice involved the ignorance of ill-treatment. This approach helped to mitigate the emotional impact of adverse experiences. For instance, one worker shared his evolving response to continuous calls from customers during delivery:

“When I just started delivering food, I got calls from customers urging me and it made me very irritable. But after some time, I got used to it and didn't care anymore. Now, when customers call me, I don't even answer the call. I just don't care...There's nothing I can do about it. No matter how much they urge me, I would not go any faster than usual.” (AU Interviewee 29)

This adaptation reflects a resilience strategy where workers adopted a dismissive stance towards customers, thereby mentally distancing themselves from workplace pressures.

Resilience among migrant workers in food-delivery work was often further manifested through an instrumental approach to work, wherein delivery tasks were leveraged to fulfill broader, non-work-related goals. This job was thus often regarded as a stepping stone towards achieving personal aspirations, such as funding education, travel, or improving language skills. For some, it also offered opportunities for relaxation and social engagement. One student worker

highlighted the benefits of this job, noting that *“If you are a student, and you do the delivery job, many people will think that you are cool.”* (AU Interviewee 6). This perception also resonated with another student who managed to cover her living expenses on her own:

“I used to live in a studio that cost \$529 in rent per week, which could be covered by my delivery earnings. I worked hard because I wanted to travel – all the expenses were earned by myself without asking for money from my parents.” (AU Interviewee 30)

Another worker used this job to explore architectural and urban environments, aligning with her studies in urban design: *“I like exploring new places because I study urban design. I’ve been to a beach resort, a residential area transformed from a cotton factory, which were all very unique places. I make money while at the same time explore the city.”* (AU Interviewee 16). The flexibility of delivery work also provided a desirable respite from daily routines, as another worker explained: *“Doing food-delivery feels like a break for me... after doing demolition work inside the building with a hammer, I am not clean... so after taking a shower, I get on my bicycle and do delivery, it’s easy and relaxed”* (AU Interviewee 26). These narratives emphasise how some workers made sense of their jobs in a more positive light, viewing the platform work as a tool to enrich their life experiences, manage their time and achieve personal goals, thereby exhibiting a level of resilience and adaptability.

Migrant workers in platform work actively joined in co-ethnic informal social groups or build connections to navigate work-related challenges. These informal groups were venues for sharing experiences and strategies, as well as providing emotional support. For example, one student worker described the dynamics in an online WeChat group formed by international students from China:

“This group primarily consists of food-delivery workers from universities including UNSW, USYD and UTS. We engage in discussions about areas with more orders, share how much we earned, as well as some tactics, particularly when changes occur in policies. We always complain about the reduced pay... I was expecting some collective organising to improve our pay or work conditions at first. However, it’s just about information sharing. No one really stands up to protest against the platform.” (AU Interviewee 15)

While these connections in some cases led to practical help on the job, such assistance among co-workers was not universally common and often depended on the strength of the connections formed. As one worker pointed out: *“If you are delivering food and you can’t make it on time, you can ask other riders to help you out – but only if you’ve managed to build a good connection with them”* (AU Interviewee 12). Further demonstrating the practical benefits of forming co-ethnic social connection, new entrants often received invaluable advice and support from experienced workers: *“When I just started this job, a veteran rider guided me throughout the registration and delivery process. So, I am happy to offer similar support to newcomers. I know how lonely and helpless they would feel as a migrant worker.”* (AU Interviewee 13). These examples underscore how co-ethnic informal networks both facilitated practical assistance and knowledge sharing and cultivated a sense of community among migrant platform workers. By sharing experiences and resources, these workers created a supportive environment that mitigated the inherent challenges of this job and their migrant roles, exemplifying a collective approach to overcoming the daily challenges of platform work. Collective resilience in this context did not refer to formal organising or overt solidarity – it showed a form of resilience that

was mediated through informal collective practices, such as knowledge sharing or emotional support among co-ethnic migrants.

6.6.2 Migration-related resilience

In exploring the resilience of migrant workers within the migration context, it is essential to consider the adaptive strategies they use to cope with everyday challenges in the host country. This resilience is manifested primarily through improving language proficiency and developing social connections, with each a crucial mechanism for navigating structural exclusions and integrating into new social environments.

One crucial aspect of resilience was the effort to improve language skills, which is essential for migrants to better integrate into the host society and navigate their socio-cultural positions. A few migrants took proactive steps by enrolling in language courses, though the effectiveness of these classes varied. For instance, one worker shared his experience with language learning: *“I really struggled when I just arrived. I could barely understand others and I ended up getting to the wrong place a few times. Therefore, I enrolled in a language class this year.”* (AU Interviewee 1). As platform workers, most of them had minimal interaction with customers, while some workers proactively created opportunities to practise English at work.

One worker explained his approach in practising language during delivery work:

“I try to talk as much as I can during deliveries – when I meet customers at the door, when I leave, or when I pick up orders. These are not long conversations, and sometimes customers don’t respond, but I don’t care. I just want to practise [my English].” (AU Interviewee 26)

Moreover, some migrants intentionally sought employment in roles that demanded greater communication skills. A worker from Turkey, for instance, decided to take on another job to practise his English:

“Since food-delivery doesn’t require much interaction; I found another job that requires more communication. It is a gardening job, my boss is a Malaysian, so we can only speak English. My English is getting better, and I feel that my life here is getting easier.” (AU Interviewee 17)

This strategic decision to engage in more communicative work environments shows a deliberate effort to enhance language proficiency to better live in the host country.

Second, building social connections was a critical aspect of migration-related resilience among migrant workers. These connections facilitated adaptation and integration into the host society, providing both emotional support and practical assistance in migration life. A key aspect of this social adaptation involved forming informal groups with co-ethnic peers to obtain practical assistance, such as knowledge and resources for better surviving in the host country. For example, a worker from Indonesia explained his motivation for joining a few online groups formed by Indonesians: *“Sometimes they post the job advertisement in the groups; some of them make food and sell it there. If you have problems with visas, you can also ask about it. They are very friendly and help each other in those groups.”* (AU Interviewee 5). Similar connections were present in other migrant communities, as highlighted by a Brazilian worker: *“We have a Facebook group called Brazilians in Sydney. People help each other with finding accommodation, jobs, and responding to queries. We speak the same language and thus can better understand each other’s feelings and circumstances.”* (AU Interviewee 23). Half of the interviewees (15 out of 30) mentioned the assistance offered by their co-ethnic peers when

finding accommodation in Australia, with 12 of them living with their co-ethnic peers at the time of interviews. These networks were particularly useful when migrants sought advice on visa issues:

“When it comes to visa-related issues, like renewing visas or getting a bridging visa, we recommend agents to each other because some agents might not be reliable... I followed my friend’s advice to get a bridging visa to extend my stay – that’s how he stayed after his student visa expired” (AU Interviewee 13)

Additionally, co-ethnic networks helped mitigate feelings of isolation and exclusion, providing an emotional buffer against the social isolation experienced by migrants. For instance, a migrant worker emphasised the benefits of living close to or regularly gathering with co-ethnic friends:

“When I just arrived, I felt very homesick. We got together to celebrate during holidays, sharing our lives and families. It’s really nice and makes me feel less lonely. Also, we are all from northeast China, so hearing the familiar accent gives me a sense of comfort. Those are the times when I feel most at ease here.” (AU Interviewee 11)

Virtual connections with co-ethnic friends also enhanced migrants’ sense of security and belonging. For instance, a migrant created a group chat with around 200 people and explained the purpose of forming such a large group: *“It is for casual chats. For those who are here alone, it offers emotional support, as the [food-delivery] job does not really offer many opportunities to meet people and make friends or to communicate with others.”* (AU Interviewee 30). Co-ethnic networks thus offered a sense of community that was crucial for both emotional support and practical assistance.

By contrast, however, some migrants deliberately chose to engage more with local residents. This was often driven by a desire to improve language skills and integrate more fully

into the host society. For instance, a migrant from Turkey decided to move out from the shared house with three other Turkish friends and explained that:

“It is helpful to have connections with people with the same origin. However, it’s not beneficial for practising my English. I would stay with them all the time, reducing my motivation to talk to others and make friends in Australia. I am trying to ‘escape’ from the Turkish environment” (AU Interviewee 26)

Another migrant found unique opportunities to engage deeply with locals, which enriched his social life: *“I made friends during my work. I helped a customer move houses, and we hang out a lot. I even went shopping with his family. This kind of friendship significantly enriches my life here.”* (AU Interviewee 9). By forming relationships with locals, migrants developed a sense of belonging, making them feel more integrated in the host country. This adaptive strategy reflects the resilience of migrant workers through forming social networks, which was crucial for them to cope with their marginalised status in the host society.

These acts of resilience, ranging from language improvement to the forming of co-ethnic social connections, demonstrate migrant workers’ efforts to adapt to their marginalised status as migrants in the host country. Their attempts to improve their language skills, whether through formal classes, strategic job selections, or everyday interactions, demonstrate a forward-looking orientation to improve their socio-economic prospects and navigate the host labour market more effectively. Meanwhile, establishing social networks, particularly through co-ethnic communities and, in some cases, with local residents, provided both emotional support and important resources for practical problem-solving. In this instance, resilience among migrant platform workers was deeply situated in their migration lives, enabling them to endure, adapt and gradually carve out more stable and connected lives in the host country.

6.7 Reworking

6.7.1 Work-related reworking

Reworking involves strategies that workers adopt to improve their material conditions without challenging the existing economic and legal structures (Katz, 2004). In the Australian context, migrant platform workers actively engaged in reworking practices, including maximising earnings, switching platforms or jobs, leveraging social networks and creating supplementary income streams, to align their working with the evolving aspirations and constraints.

First, migrant platform workers often used strategic practices to maximise their income, such as using multiple apps simultaneously ('multi-apping') and selecting optimal times (e.g. at night, rainy days, or peak hours) for delivery work to capitalise on higher demand and boost their income. For example, a worker shared the benefits of working at night: *"There are fewer riders at night, so it is easier for me to get more orders. With fewer vehicles on the road, I can deliver more quickly by running red lights...I can make over A\$100, and sometimes even over A\$200 for just a few hours during nighttime."* (AU Interviewee 2). Some workers preferred to work on rainy days for bonuses or adjusted their working time around app-based incentive schemes (e.g. so-called Quests on the Uber Eats app) to maximise their hourly earnings. However, several interviewees revealed that these incentive systems are designed with escalating thresholds, which pushed workers to their limits while reinforcing the platforms' operating models by encouraging higher labour supply. These strategies demonstrate a conscious navigation of platform algorithms to optimise earnings, indicating a shift from mere coping to strategic recalibration of labour within existing platform structures.

Second, job mobility was another expression of reworking. Migrants often re-evaluated their job choices to find better alignment with their needs, whether for flexibility, stability or

higher income. Several interviewees had shifted from traditional employment sectors to food-delivery work, driven by the desire for flexibility and potentially higher earnings. For instance, a worker previously engaged in construction industry left and joined a food-delivery platform for its relative autonomy: *“I used to work at a construction site, but I found the hours too long and the work too exhausting, so I switched to food-delivery.”* (AU Interviewee 19). Another interviewee highlighted its value in offering opportunities for maximising savings within a short period of time: *“I am leaving in three months when my student visa expires... this job is very flexible and enables me to save more money before I return.”* (AU Interviewee 16). On the contrary, however, others exited platform work in search of more predictable income and stable work conditions. For instance, one interviewee who aspired for longer term residency recounted his transition from a courier to a retail worker:

“The downside of food-delivery is that it cannot offer a consistent income... Every day is a different story – it depends on the numbers of orders. So, I decided to quit. The sales job at the airport means that I have standard working hours with a stable income.” (AU Interviewee 27)

Such movements, whether into or out of food-delivery platform work, highlight how migrant workers reconfigured their labour trajectories to better accommodate personal priorities and long-term goals.

Similar to inter-sectoral moves, some workers reworked their platform experience by switching between food-delivery platforms. One worker explained his shift from Hungry Panda to other mainstream platforms, in search for a better work environment: *“I previously worked on Hungry Panda, but the pay was too low. That’s why I switched to Uber Eats, DoorDash, and Menulog, where the management is better, and there is no need to bid for orders.”* (AU

Interviewee 9). Such transitions reveal an approach through which workers improved their working conditions and earning potentials not by exiting the platform economy entirely, but by evaluating the differentiated organisational management in each platform for an optimal option without challenging its power structure.

Social networks played a crucial role in supporting these reworking strategies. Many migrant workers relied on friends, or migrant communities to access and act on information about platform options, earning potential or job entry process. As one interviewee recalled:

“I started by cleaning tables at a restaurant, but it didn’t pay well. My roommate was working on EASI, and he told me he could make \$200 a day, which was quite good back in 2018. So, I gave it a shot and eventually decided to do this because the earnings are higher compared to other jobs I can do.” (AU Interviewee 30)

Through these informal networks, migrant workers shared insights and experiences to help each other identify and transition to more suitable employment. Social embeddedness, in this context, facilitated knowledge-sharing and enabled more informed reworking decisions.

A more novel form of reworking involved monetising food-delivery work through social media engagement. Several migrants transformed their food-delivery experiences into digital content appealing to other fellow migrants or prospective migrants seeking job opportunities in Australia. By sharing practical tips, personal narratives, and referral links on social media, they strategically positioned themselves as informal guides or intermediaries within broader migration networks, creating additional revenue streams to improve their material conditions. One international student, for instance, gained significant increase in online followers by posting about her food-delivery experiences on RedNote, a Chinese social media platform. Her posts

offered practical insights for others, especially fellow international students, who were seeking for part-time jobs to support their lives in Australia:

“Since I started delivering food and shared my working life on RedNote, one of my posts went viral and increasingly more people followed my account. Many of them were international students like me, trying to find a part-time job here. Some even signed up through my referral link, so I get some bonuses” (AU Interviewee 6)

In another case, a worker leveraged the experience of doing food-delivery in Australia and turned it into monetised consultancy services. Through livestreaming and posting videos about his own migration and work experiences on TikTok, he became an influencer and attracted viewers from abroad who were interested in pursuing similar opportunities. He explained how he made money through partnerships with migration agencies:

“A lot of people message me after watching my videos, asking how to come to Australia and do food-delivery. I share my experience and then refer them to a migration agency. If they use that service, the agency gives me a commission” (AU Interviewee 21)

While operating within the confines of the platform economy, these examples demonstrate how migrant platform workers creatively reworked their conditions by transforming their precarious experiences into opportunities for alternative revenue streams and tapping into the informational needs of other migrants.

These actions, whether through algorithmic navigation, job mobility, network utilisation or innovative revenue creation, demonstrate how migrant platform workers improved their conditions within the constraints of the existing platform work structure. This aligns with Katz’s (2004) understanding of reworking as pragmatic responses that recalibrate power relations to improve workers’ material conditions without dismantling the systemic constraints.

6.7.2 Migration-related reworking

From a migration-oriented perspective, *reworking* refers to the legally sanctioned strategies through which migrant platform workers seek to extend their stay or pursue permanent residency within the boundaries of the existing regulatory system. Rather than mere takers of migration regulations, migrant platform workers engaged in forward-looking planning and structural manoeuvring, including navigating visa categories, leveraging family circumstances, and aligning their work or study paths with immigration requirements. These actions exemplify a form of pragmatic agency that recalibrates migrants' legal and institutional positioning over time, in line with Katz's (2004) definition of reworking.

A central strategy through which migrant workers interviewed reworked their legal conditions was by churning between different temporary visas to extend their legal stay and create potential pathways towards permanency. One interviewee, for instance, described how he and his wife strategically cycled through various visa categories (e.g., student visa, temporary work visa, dependent visa) to maintain legal continuity in Australia while planning for their child's eligibility for citizenship:

“After completing my master's degree 4 years ago, I applied for the temporary work visa, which allowed me to stay for another 2 years. After that, my wife studied for another 2 years, during which I stayed on a dependent visa. Now I am back on a student visa, with my wife on a dependent visa.” (AU Interviewee 18)

This case illustrates a long-term strategy that integrated education, employment, and family planning, demonstrating how visa transitions were tactically managed to maintain legal residency and seek for eventual settlement opportunities. Such strategies are often shaped by migration

policies on visa renewals and extensions. As one interviewee on a student visa illustrated: *“When I realised that I could apply for a second-year working holiday visa, I cannot fulfill the requirements for a renewal as I only had 2 months left before the visa expired...So, I applied for a student visa to stay longer.”* (AU Interviewee 4).

In addition to strategic visa planning, migrants also reworked their conditions by purposely selecting educational or occupational pathways that improve their eligibility for skilled migration or employer-sponsored programs. One international student, majoring in economics, explained why he planned to switch majors for his master’s degree in order to improve his migration prospects: *“Economics is not a good choice for getting permanent residency. I will study social work or early childhood education, which are on the skill list for immigration purposes.”* (AU Interviewee 8). This sentiment was echoed by another migrant’s choice in studying pastry: *“I studied pastry because I learned that it would be helpful in obtaining permanent residency (PR) through the Temporary Skill Shortage visa. I just need to work for another 2 years before I can apply for PR.”* (AU Interviewee 24). These examples highlight how migrants adjusted their education and employment trajectories to align with skilled migration pathways under the Australian labour migration regime.

In sum, these narratives illustrate how migrant platform workers engaged in migration-related reworking by strategically managing their visa status and aligning their personal and professional decisions with the architecture of Australia’s labour migration system. From coordinating visa transitions, to tailoring study choices towards permanent residency-eligible occupations, migrants demonstrated a goal-oriented reworking strategy in navigating institutional structures.

6.8 Resistance

6.8.1 Work-related resistance

In the platform economy, work-related *resistance* among migrant platform workers involves practices that challenge or circumvent restrictive platform policies to avoid or even change exploitative work conditions. These everyday acts of defiance demonstrate workers' capability in navigating the constraints imposed by algorithmic management and precarious legal status. Two key strategies stood out in the Australian case: navigating the platform's timing system and working under another person's account.

One common tactic involved manipulating the system's delivery timing mechanism to maximise earnings and efficiency. Riders often delayed collecting orders to get more nearby orders, which allowed them to complete several deliveries in a single trip rather than following the app's scheduled sequence. To avoid penalties for late pickups, they marked the order as 'picked up' before they collected it. One worker explained this practice:

"When I accept an order, I don't rush straight to the restaurant. I wait to see if I can get a few more orders in the same area. When the pickup time is almost up, I mark the order as 'picked up' and upload any random photo – the system doesn't really check." (AU Interviewee 21)

A more complex form of resistance involved working without legitimate working rights by renting another person's account. This practice was especially common among migrants on tourist visas or when the account was suspended by the platform. To bypass the platform's identity verification, these workers paid a 'rental fee' to account holders and relied on them to pass periodic photo checks. One interviewee described how this arrangement operated:

“When I am on a tourist visa, I couldn’t get an ABN [Australian Business Number] to create my own account. The only option is to use someone else’s account. If the platform asks for a photo for verification, I just get the account owner to send it through. It’s a way to keep working and earning even when I am not legally allowed to.” (AU Interviewee 4)

These practices demonstrate how migrant platform workers actively navigated multiple restrictions, including those imposed by platform algorithms and by migration rules. By manipulating technical loopholes in digital systems and using others’ accounts, migrants maintained access to this job, even at the risk of breaking employment and migration rules. While not a direct confrontation, the first strategy of tactical delay challenges platform expectations and exemplifies a subtle form of resistance enacted through everyday disruption. The second strategy was at the intersection of work-related and migration-related resistance, highlighting a challenge faced by migrant platform workers: the need to cope with the dual pressures of maintaining economic stability and managing their legal status.

Beyond navigating platform organisation, the absence of collective organising among migrant platform workers revealed another dimension of work-related resistance, which was shaped by insecurity, perceived disadvantages, and short-term horizons of migrant workers. None of the interviewees in Australia reported joining unions or participating in protests or strikes against the platforms. When asked for reasons, many interviewees described feelings of insecurity and vulnerability as migrants to enact open confrontation. Some expressed fear of retaliation from the platforms, citing stories about peer workers whose accounts were suspended after participating in such activities. As one interviewee explained:

“I heard two Chinese riders joined the protest last year, and their accounts were suspended after. I can’t afford that. If I lose this job, I don’t know what to do and how I should pay my rent and bills. I’d rather stay quiet and just keep working (AU Interviewee 11)

Their reluctance was also shaped by a perception of exclusion from standard work rights. Some interviewees expressed uncertainty about whether they were entitled to participate in strikes or union activities, assuming these were rights reserved for local, unionised workers. For instance, an interviewee was surprised when asked about union and strikes: *“I thought only local workers can join unions or protests. I am just a migrant doing food-delivery here. No one ever told me I could be part of it.” (AU Interviewee 22).*

Another important factor shaping their disengagement from collective resistance action was workers’ temporal horizons. Many migrants viewed their stay in Australia as temporary and were unwilling to invest time or resources in collective organising efforts that might not generate immediate benefits. As one rider put it: *“If I join a strike, I lose the day’s income, but the platform doesn’t care. There are always plenty of other riders ready to take the orders. So, I would rather do the delivery and make more money.” (AU Interviewee 28).* These narratives suggest that migrants’ reluctance to engage in collective mobilisation was often shaped by their risk management under precarity and uncertainty. Fear of retaliation, perceived exclusion from labour rights, and short-term economic priorities jointly constrained their acts of collective organising, reinforcing a pattern where acts of resistance remained individualised, subtle and pragmatic rather than collective, overt and confrontational.

6.8.2 Migration-related resistance

In addition to resisting platforms' restrictive work rules, migrant platform workers in Australia also enacted various strategies that bent or subverted migration regulations to extend their legal stay and sustain their livelihoods. These practices reveal a distinct dimension of resistance that extended beyond the workplace, by showing how migrant workers navigated the constraints of the visa system and associated legal obligations related to taxation and penalties through defiance in the host country.

One form of resistance involved migrants working without legitimate work rights by engaging in food-delivery work while on tourist visas. As discussed earlier, these workers often rented delivery accounts from registered account holders to bypass platform identity checks, and thus earning income without holding an Australian Business Number (ABN) or a valid work permit. While previously examined as an everyday workplace resistance tactic, it also represented a form of migration-related resistance, as workers deliberately sidestepped visa conditions that prohibit employment. An interviewee described his experience of exploiting the flexibility of his multiple-entry tourist visa, flying in and out of Australia on a short-term tourist visa to extend his stay and maximise earnings: *“I worked for 3 months, then went back to China for a break when the 3-month visiting period was expired. Then I came back on the same tourist visa and worked for another 3 months before leaving again.”* (AU Interviewee 2). In this instance, the tourist visa effectively became an informal approach to earn money in Australia, used as a stopgap “working visa” that enabled short-term economic gain without formal working rights.

The strategic use, and sometimes misuse, of student visas was a second widespread tactic. While nominally designed for educational purposes, many interviewees described using them as

a legal conduit for accessing employment. To maintain this legal cover, some migrants enrolled in low-cost programs or courses with minimal attendance requirements, seeing enrolment as an approach to maintain visa compliance. To navigate the regulatory requirements, a few interviewees relied on agents or informal intermediaries who managed their paperwork and advised on the actions needed to keep the visa valid and retain legal work status. For instance, an interviewee described this arrangement bluntly:

“Even though I am on a student visa, [long pause], it is not really a school. I just pay the tuition fees, show up once a week to check in, and submit some homework. If I am too tired, I pay someone else to do it. It’s just a way to keep the visa valid so I can keep doing food-delivery and make money” (AU Interviewee 5)

Another interviewee explained how different agents offered varying levels of support to ensure visa renewals proceed smoothly:

“Some might tell you to attend classes, while others say you don’t have to. My agent said submitting homework helped with visa renewal process. Some agents even have people to do the homework for you. A good agent will have all documents well prepared for you. If your documents are incomplete, the immigration office might look into your record; and if they see that you didn’t attend classes for months, it’ll be hard to get your next visa.”

(AU Interviewee 12)

These narratives illustrate that through selective compliance and third-party assistance, the student visas were effectively transformed into a workaround, through which migrants gained access to legal work rights.

Migrants on student visas also regularly exceeded the legally permitted work limit of 48 hours per fortnight during study periods under Australian visa rules (Department of Home

Affairs, 2023), exploiting the loosely regulated nature of platform work to avoid detection of such rule-breaking practices. As one migrant on a student visa explained: *“With Uber Eats, I can work longer than the legal work hour limits since the platform pays by trip, not by the hour, making it hard to track my actual working hours.”* (AU Interviewee 7). Some interviewees justified this rule-bending behaviour by pointing to a perceived loophole in the classification of platform workers as independent contractors: *“We are using our own ABN, so technically we are not employees of the platform. That means the work hour limits do not apply to us.”*^{viii} (AU Interviewee 30). These narratives jointly illustrate a pattern of resistance among student migrants, who repurposed the educational purpose of student visas to sustaining their legal stay while maximising their income. Rather than simple non-compliance, this practice reflects a conscious defiance of migration controls that constrain migrants’ livelihoods, positioning everyday visa rule-bending as a form of resistance to the regulatory regimes governing migrant workers.

The third tactic involved the strategic use of bridging visas, which are nominally intended to maintain legal stay while migrants await decisions on substantive visa applications (e.g., protection visas, student visas). While bridging visas are designed as short-term transitional mechanisms, a few interviewees used them strategically to extend legal residence and accompanying work rights in Australia, even when they knew their applications of substantive visa had little chance of success. For instance, one interviewee explained how he used the bridging visa to maintain legal presence in Australia:

“I’m on a bridging visa A. I applied for a protection visa, under which I claimed I couldn’t go home because of persecution, but I know it is very unlikely to be approved

^{viii} While some interviewees perceived it as legal, existing case law suggests this is incorrect (*Verma v Minister for Immigration & Anor*, 2017).

because the claim is not true. However, it allows me to stay and work for years while waiting for the decision.” (AU Interviewee 2)

Once rejected, by lodging appeals or repeated applications for judicial review, migrants could keep their bridging status active for extended periods. Another migrant further elaborated on the procedural design of this system that made this possible:

“There’s technically no time limit on this visa. When it is rejected, you can ask your agent to file an appeal for judicial review, which can drag on for years. But you can’t leave Australia – if you do, you cannot come back.” (AU Interviewee 29)

Financial considerations also shaped the use of bridging visa. An interviewee compared bridging visas with student visas, explaining how he weighed up the financial and administrative trade-offs when choosing which visa pathway to follow: *“We need to pay at least A\$8-9k for a 1-year student visa, but I only spent A\$2-3k getting a bridging visa for staying 5 to 6 years, which is much more cost-effective.”* (AU Interviewee 3). These narratives illustrate how bridging visas, despite designed as temporary mechanisms, were strategically repurposed by some migrants as cheaper, *de facto* longer-term work and residence permits in Australia. Such practices reflect a form of regulatory defiance, in which migrants exploited legal grey zones to extend their work and residence rights, thereby disrupting the visa system.

Finally, a more everyday but pervasive form of migration-related resistance was the deliberate evasion of tax and other financial obligations. Many migrant workers openly admitted that they did not declare their delivery earnings, instead sending remittances back home without paying local income tax. One interviewee described the common use of this practice and how the perceived low risk of detection made it viable:

“Most of us don’t declare our earnings. No one really checks, so it’s up to us. If I declared all my income, I would need to pay over A\$12,000 a year. That makes no sense when I’m here just to earn money and send it home. Unless you’re employed by a big local company, no one is monitoring you on this tax issue.” (AU Interviewee 3)

Another worker justified this by explicitly linking tax avoidance practices to his short-term stay in Australia:

“I have never paid taxes. I come here to make money, not to contribute. Even if they the ATO [Australian Tax Office] checked, I don’t think they would investigate and chase small cases like mine. I work and save as much as I can, sending it back home before I leave. By the time they come after me, the money has all been sent back to my home country, right?” (AU Interviewee 9)

The connection between paying taxes and temporal commitment to the host country was echoed by another interviewee: *“If I decided to settle here in the long-term, I would pay taxes. But for now, it’s not something I should worry about.”* (AU Interviewee 7). Such a short-term horizon also shaped how some migrant workers handled traffic fines incurred during food-delivery work. Several workers revealed that they ignored speeding and parking fines, seeing them as irrelevant because they planned to leave the country soon: *“I’ve had a few parking fines and one for speeding, but I never paid them. I’ll be back in my country in a year or two anyway. What can they do if I’m not here?”* (AU Interviewee 2). These narratives demonstrate how migrant workers’ temporal horizon shaped their engagement with regulations in the host country. For many, they viewed their time in Australia as a transitional phase to maximise income before returning home. These acts show how everyday practices became a quiet form of resistance

against the obligations embedded in migration governance, challenging the expectation of economic contribution without overt confrontation.

In sum, these practices demonstrate a distinct dimension of resistance among migrant platform workers in Australia, which did not take the form of open confrontation or institutional challenge. Instead, these migrant workers adopted tactical but risky strategies to sidestep, bend or break visa conditions in migration rules, legal obligations and institutional oversight, seeking to circumvent migration controls and preserve their ability to work and live in Australia. These acts did not aim to radically transform labour migration regimes, but they embodied an oppositional orientation towards the regulatory conditions governing their migration life. For many, these acts of resistance were shaped by their short-term temporal horizons on their stay in Australia, highlighting how migrants' agency operated at the intersection of precarious legal status, economic necessity and temporal horizons. The findings also reveal the role of platform economy in offering space for migrants to manoeuvre within, and sometimes against, the boundaries of labour migration regime.

6.9 Summary

This chapter has examined how international migrants working in Australia's platform economy navigate structural constraints shaped by precarious work conditions, migration policies and temporal uncertainty. Migrants' motivations to migrate to Australia were diverse and overlapping, ranging from economic goals to educational advancement and lifestyle exploration, yet these motivations were closely linked to their temporal horizons and subsequent agency behaviours. While some viewed their stay as short-term and instrumental, others held aspirations

for long-term settlement and stability, illustrating how temporal orientations evolved in response to structural conditions and personal life.

Within the workplace, migrants were concentrated in food-delivery work that offered flexible entry but demanded long hours, imposed physical and emotional strain, and lacked formal protections. Their agency practices were shaped by these precarities and their legal status. Resilience was observed in the form of emotional adaptation, instrumental use of work to pursue personal goals, and support drawn from co-ethnic networks. Reworking strategies included maximising earnings through tactical labour decisions, shifting platforms or job sectors, and leveraging social media or peer networks to improve financial returns. In terms of migration-related reworking, many migrants strategically managed their visa status and study–work pathways to prolong their stay or pursue permanent residency. Finally, some engaged in resistance through informal or covert practices that often bend or break rules, such as gaming the algorithmic management systems, circumventing identity checks through rented account, working beyond legal hours, or misusing different visa categories to sustain their mobility and stay in the host country despite regulatory restrictions.

These findings demonstrate how migrant agency in the Australian platform work context was shaped by the legal temporariness and regulatory restrictions of the labour migration regime. At the same time, migrants responded to these constraints with a spectrum of adaptive and resistant practices that reflected both short-term pragmatism and longer-term aspirations. Compared to their counterparts in China, who faced internal restrictions through the *hukou* system, temporary migrants in Australia operated in a transnational context where immigration control and rights are more strictly regulated, resulting in different forms and limits of agency. The next chapter turns to the Chinese case, enabling a comparative analysis of how internal

migrants engaged with platform work and migration governance under a structurally distinct but similarly restrictive regime.

CHAPTER 7 Findings on Case B – China

7.1 Introduction

This chapter largely mirrors previous chapter on the Australian case and investigates the motivations, temporal horizons and agency practices of rural-to-urban migrants working in China's platform economy, focusing on food-delivery workers in Guangzhou.

It begins by examining migrants' motivations for internal mobility, including economic drivers, personal development goals and family influences in Section 7.2, and how these motivations informed their temporal orientations in Section 7.3. Section 7.4 outlines their work experiences, highlighting income levels, working hours and emotional and physical risks, followed by a discussion of challenges stemming from institutional structures (i.e., the *hukou* system) and migrants' non-local rural status in Section 7.5. These conditions shape both the opportunities and constraints that migrants encounter in their working and migration lives.

Building on this contextual foundation, the second half of the chapter explores rural migrants' agency practices. Section 7.6 to 7.8 analyses expressions of resilience in coping with precarious work and adapting to urban life, reworking strategies aimed at improving employment conditions or secure long-term settlement, and instances of resistance against exploitative platform practices or hukou-based exclusions. Taken together, these insights shed light on how rural-to-urban migrants navigate structurally embedded constraints in China's urban labour markets and labour migration regime.

7.2 Motivations of rural-to-urban migrants

In exploring the agency of internal rural-to-urban migrant workers in China, it is crucial to understand the motivations underlying their decisions to migrate. Migration, whether driven by

economic necessity, personal aspirations or a combination of several factors, shapes the daily experiences and strategic choices of workers. The intentions behind migration often reflect broader socio-economic dynamics and personal circumstances, which in turn influence the forms of agency exercised by individuals. This section delves into the motivations of migrants moving to Guangzhou, exploring a spectrum of personal, economic and familial factors that shape their decisions. These motivations are closely linked to the migrants' temporal horizons – whether they view their stay as a temporary sojourn or a long-term relocation – and their agency practices in navigating work and life in the receiving society.

Central to these motivations is the economic allure of urban areas (i.e., Guangzhou in this study), influencing most interviewees' (20 out of 30) migration decisions. Some migrants recognised a significant disparity in income levels between Guangzhou and their hometowns, which drove them to the city. For instance, one interviewee from Guizhou highlighted the direct financial improvement after he started working in Guangzhou: *“The income here is higher than that of most jobs I could find back in my hometown, where the maximum I can earn is only ¥3-4k per month.”* (CN Interviewee 4). The economic development of Guangzhou also attracted migrants seeking opportunities in sectors that are thriving, such as food-delivery work. One participant explained how he was influenced by his co-ethnic peer: *“It [food-delivery job] was recommended by a laoxiang who was doing food-delivery at that time. He said he could earn around ¥10k a month and the job is thriving in megacities like Guangzhou, so I came.”* (CN Interviewee 17). The decision to migrate was also catalysed by economic recessions in the migrants' hometowns. One interviewee described a gloomy situation exacerbated by the pandemic: *“After the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, I can hardly find a job back home – a lot of businesses closed down. Then I considered leaving and started working in Guangzhou.”* (CN

Interviewee 11). Another interviewee facing a similar problem noted: *“My family runs a restaurant back in town, but the business was not good since last year, so I came to work in Guangzhou to help support my family.”* (CN Interviewee 12). These narratives indicate that individuals’ internal migration was often prompted by economic motivations, such as declining local economies or the search for higher income and better employment in cities.

The pursuit of personal development is another driving force behind the decision of many migrants to move to Guangzhou. Two interviewees pursued higher education in Guangzhou and decided to stay post-graduation due to the employment prospects and lifestyle the city offered, highlighting a natural transition from education to employment at the same place. Some interviewees were seeking to improve their career paths and considered Guangzhou as a place with better job opportunities relevant to their skills or specialisations. A piano teacher, for instance, shared his career trajectory and the reasons for choosing Guangzhou:

“I used to be a music teacher in schools. In large cities like Guangzhou, there are many middle-class families willing to invest in their children’s hobbies like playing the piano, providing me with a better career development opportunity. I might be able to run my own business in piano teaching after building up a network and clientele.” (CN

Interviewee 13)

Echoing this sentiment, another interviewee explained how he was motivated in launching his career in Guangzhou:

“After graduating, we tried to run a swimming training class in our hometown, but it failed. Later, my friends who had moved to Guangzhou told me there was a growing demand for personal trainers. They said the market was much bigger here, so I came to explore some better job opportunities.” (CN Interviewee 20)

These migrants indicated a blend of economic and personal development reasons for moving to Guangzhou, highlighting the availability of various job opportunities offering broader career choices, and professional growth not available in their hometowns.

For many migrants in this study, family connections played a crucial role in their decisions to move to Guangzhou, as illustrated through two primary dimensions: familial influence and marital ties. One interviewee explained how established family networks in Guangzhou affected his decision after graduation: *“My mum asked me to go to Guangzhou because my uncle runs a law firm here. She thought I could use this network to find a job here.”* (CN Interviewee 8). Similarly, another migrant followed his family’s path and started working in Guangzhou soon after he graduated from high school: *“I came here because my family is working here – it feels like a ‘tradition’ in my town that most of us come here for work.”* (CN Interviewee 19). They both emphasised how family or kinship networks provided both initial motivations and practical support in settling in a new environment. Marrying someone from Guangzhou also emerged as a determinant in migration decisions. Two participants (CN Interviewee 3 and 23) each relocated to be with their spouse, which shaped their decision to obtain local *hukou* and permanently settle in Guangzhou.

The diverse reasons for migrating to Guangzhou, ranging from economic prospects, educational purposes, career development to family reasons, illustrate the various factors that motivated rural residents to pursue a new life in an urban setting. Similar to the Australian case, economic motivations were the most prevalent reason for migration, with many workers seeking higher income in response to stagnant or declining economic opportunities in their hometowns. However, in contrast to Australia, where educational aspirations featured more prominently, fewer Chinese rural migrants cited education as their primary motivation. Instead, family

influence and established kinship networks played a more central role in shaping migration trajectories.

These motivations often foreshadow the temporal horizons migrants have after arrival. The next section explores this in greater detail, analysing how rural migrant workers in Guangzhou perceived the duration of their stay and how such perceptions interacted with their socio-economic positioning in urban life.

7.3 Temporal horizons of rural-to-urban migrants

Migrants' temporal horizons were influenced by the initial motivations but also evolved depending on personal experiences, economic conditions, and changing family dynamics. By analysing migrants' temporal perspectives, this thesis gains further insights into the migrants' short-term and/or long-term plans and how the different horizons shaped their behaviours in navigating urban life. Similar to the Australian case, three groups of migrants with different temporal orientations were identified.

The first group of migrants viewed their stay in Guangzhou as temporary, driven primarily by the goal of accumulating financial capital before returning to their hometowns. Many of these migrants maintained strong emotional connections and familial ties to their places of origin and regarded their time in the city as a phase to maximise savings before pursuing more stable lives back home. For example, an interviewee described his migration as a strategic step towards future entrepreneurship: *"I want to earn as much as I can when I'm young, then go back to start a small business in my hometown. It's not easy to settle in cities like Guangzhou. Look at how many people go to Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Shanghai for work, and very few of them ultimately get to stay."* (CN Interviewee 2). For a few migrants, return intentions reflected a

lifestyle preference. For instance, one participant expressed his discomfort with urban life and a longing to return to his hometown: *“I came here for some new experiences and making some money, but I’ve never planned to stay here for the long term as I still prefer the environment and lifestyle back home.”* (CN Interviewee 4). At the same time, return plans were shaped by structural constraints that limited the feasibility of permanent urban settlement. High living costs in cities like Guangzhou created ongoing financial stress, reinforcing the perception that urban life is unsustainable. As an interviewee described, dealing with the high living costs and lack of social security in the city strengthened his desire to return home:

“Yes, it is [stressful]! I’ve already delayed my rent payment by 10 days, but I still won’t get paid for another 10 days. My landlord said if I don’t pay today, I will have to move out. Now I’m trying to borrow money to cover the rent. If can’t sort it out, I’ll have no choice but to go back home.” (CN Interviewee 5)

In addition to economic pressures, the exclusionary nature of the *hukou* system also played a critical role in shaping return-oriented outlooks. Some migrants expressed frustration at being unable to access the rights associated with full urban citizenship, despite years of working in the city. As one worker recalled: *“I’ve been working in Guangzhou for several years, but I still feel like an outsider. It’s like no matter how long I stay, I’m not really part of this city. So eventually, I’ll go back, it’s just a matter of when.”* (CN Interviewee 18).

These narratives illustrate how return intentions were shaped by a mix of voluntary and involuntary factors. While some migrants actively chose to leave due to lifestyle preferences or family obligations, others were compelled to leave by institutional barriers and social exclusion associated with the *hukou* regime.

Yet, for some migrants, returning to their hometowns was more complex in practice. Some interviewees described their attempts to move back but struggled to reintegrate into rural life and secure stable livelihoods there, which ultimately prompted them to return to the city. One rider shared this experience:

“I went back to my hometown last year, planning to run a small restaurant and settle there. But after a few months, I realised there wasn’t much opportunity, and I couldn’t get used to that lifestyle anymore. So, I came back here to keep working. It’s hard. I don’t really want to stay in Guangzhou forever, but I also can’t see myself going back now.” (CN Interviewee 22).

Although he retained a desire to return, the limited options at home and restricted access to urban citizenship rights in the city complicated his decision-making, resulting in a form of prolonged uncertainty.

The second group comprised workers with flexible and contingent outlooks on their stay in Guangzhou, characterised by open-ended plans and a readiness to move between cities to pursue better opportunities. Often young and unattached, these rural migrants did not view their current residence in cities as permanent, nor did they have immediate intentions to return home, leading to frequent relocations driven by economic opportunities in most cases. These individuals adopted a wait-and-see attitude shaped by short-term evaluation of job markets, income potential and living costs, and were willing to move wherever opportunities arose. For instance, one interviewee, who had already worked in several cities before arriving in Guangzhou, described his pragmatic approach to earning a higher income:

“I might do something else after saving some money from this job – it just depends on where I can earn more. Living in Guangzhou is fine, but if there are better opportunities or jobs with higher income in another city, I will go. I like to explore different places,

especially when I am young and I can easily adapt to different environments.” (CN Interviewee 1)

Another interviewee further highlighted how the absence of local *hukou* limited his access to essential social services and shaped his decision: *“Maybe I’ll stay here for another year or two. There’s no point settling permanently in big cities without a local hukou.”* (CN Interviewee 11). This reflects a broader sentiment among the workers who, without local urban *hukou*, had little incentive to pursue long-term settlement in the city. These migrants adopted a wait-and-see orientation, prioritised economic mobility and remained flexible to moving across places, demonstrating a distinct temporal orientation where migration was seen as an adaptive and ongoing process.

The third group of migrants can be characterised as ‘aspirational settlers’, who expressed a clear intention to settle permanently in Guangzhou. For many, this aspiration was closely tied to family considerations, such as children’s education and long-term security. Some interviewees had already lived in Guangzhou for several years and described having developed strong emotional and physical connections to the city. These workers no longer viewed their migration as transitional but as a pathway to urban integration.

Within this group, however, two different trajectories can be identified. The first comprised migrants actively seeking to obtain a local *hukou* as a means to secure full access to social welfare benefits and urban citizenship. One interviewee, for instance, articulated his long-term commitment to staying in Guangzhou and the importance of getting a local *hukou* to access the educational benefits for his child: *“We definitely want to settle down here for the long term, so that my son can go to public school and get an education here.”* (CN Interviewee 10). These

migrants saw *hukou* acquisition as crucial to anchoring their lives in the city, and were actively pursuing pathways to achieve it, despite acknowledging the difficulties involved.

The second trajectory included a younger generation of migrants who, despite recognising the difficulty of obtaining a local *hukou*, still aspired to permanently settle in urban areas. They rejected the idea of returning to their rural hometowns and instead saw the city as a more desirable and modern place to build a future. For these individuals, permanent settlement was not necessarily conditional upon acquiring *hukou* in Guangzhou. Some expressed willingness to stay without full citizenship rights, while others considered relocating to smaller cities with lower *hukou* thresholds if necessary. As one interviewee explained:

“I’ve never thought about going back to the countryside. I want to live in a city. Even if I can’t get a hukou here, I’ll just stay and try to get by. Or if it’s really too difficult, I can move to a smaller city where it’s easier to settle.” (CN Interviewee 6)

This subgroup reflected a growing detachment from rural roots and a strong urban orientation among younger generations of migrants.

Across all groups, migrants’ temporal horizons were closely intertwined with their motivations. Economic drivers were common across all three groups of migrants, but they led to different orientations depending on factors such as life stage, institutional barriers, and emotional ties to place. Younger migrants with limited family responsibilities often adopted a flexible, open-ended approach, treating migration as an ongoing process rather than a step towards settlement or return (e.g., CN Interviewees 1, 11, 12, 17 and 30). By contrast, others channelled similar economic motives into more fixed return or settlement plans. Aspirational settlers, meanwhile, were often motivated by family commitments or long-term development goals, yet

their desired permanence was often tempered by the institutional exclusions embedded in the *hukou* system.

These findings reveal that motivations and temporal horizons were shaped by evolving experiences, institutional constraints and migrants' changing capacities to envision their future. These temporal horizons further informed how rural migrants navigated platform work conditions and marginalised positions in the society, as explored in later sections in this chapter.

7.4 Work experiences of rural-to-urban migrants

This section examines the work experiences of rural-to-urban migrants in Guangzhou, focusing on their engagement with food-delivery platforms. Most participants (26 out of 30) were full-time riders who relied on this work as their only source of income, while four others worked part-time, typically for only 1–2 hours daily during peak hours or after their main jobs.

Among the participants, 20 riders were employed under the *zhongbao* (crowdsourced) model, while the remaining 10 worked as *zhuansong* (outsourced) riders at the time of interviews. While both groups performed similar delivery tasks and earned comparable incomes when averaged hourly, outsourced riders were subject to more managerial oversight, with service station managers monitoring their check-ins, working hours and delivery process. In contrast, crowdsourced riders experienced greater temporal flexibility and autonomy, though in practice many still worked long hours to maximise their income.

The full-time workers reported monthly earnings ranging from ¥6k to ¥15k, depending on their daily working hours (typically 8 to 15 hours). These piece-rate-based earnings equated to an approximate hourly rate of ¥25–30. Part-time workers, by contrast, often made higher

hourly income of ¥40 to ¥80 by boosting their income during peak hours. One part-time worker explained:

“I work for just 2 hours from 11am to 1pm. On a good day, I can get around 10 orders for one trip in an hour, so 20 orders in total, amounting to around ¥150-160 within 2 hours. But if I was unlucky that day, it might drop to around ¥100.” (CN Interviewee 3)

Despite differences in working hours, all workers reported earnings above Guangzhou’s minimum wage of ¥2,300 per month or ¥22 per hour for non-standard work, highlighting the financial appeal of food-delivery work. However, the pandemic intensified competition, as many individuals facing unemployment or reduced income turned to platform work for supplementary income. As a result, some workers noted a decrease in their income, which was attributed to the market saturation: *“After COVID, many unemployed people have started doing food-delivery, so there are a lot more riders than before, and the unit price has also been lowered by the platform.”* (CN Interviewee 11).

Workers who consistently earned over ¥10,000 per month typically worked exceptionally long hours, often exceeding 12 hours per day. One high performing rider described his routine and showed his achievement:

“I worked for around 15 hours a day on average. Last week I earned over ¥4k and ranked 28th among all riders on this platform in Guangzhou. There was an incentive program last week, with an additional ¥300 as a reward. It’s exhausting, but the pay makes it worth it.” (CN Interviewee 2)

Despite the long hours required for this job, most riders expressed little dissatisfaction. A key reason lies in the platforms’ piece-rate payment structures, which incentivised high order volumes through tiered pay systems: *“It’s based on how many orders you have completed. Say,*

for example, for the first 500 orders, you can make ¥7 per order; then from 500 to 700 orders, it's ¥7.5 per order, and from 700 to 900 orders, it is ¥8 per order..." (CN Interviewee 13). This earnings model encouraged extended working hours for achieving higher piece-rate pay levels. Some riders adopted a goal-oriented approach. For instance, a few workers mentioned they would not finish their day until reaching certain earnings or completing a certain number of deliveries: *"I don't stop until I hit my target. Yesterday I worked until midnight to reach 70 deliveries. Today I finished early because I got some very good orders and have reached my goal"* (CN Interviewee 16).

The long working hours further intensified the physically demanding nature of food-delivery work. Many workers reported working over 10 hours a day, often without taking a single day off, which contributed to chronic fatigue and raised the risk of accidents. One rider shared his gruelling work routine and its consequences:

"I usually work more than 12 hours a day, sometimes finishing at midnight. Once I was so tired that I didn't see the traffic light clearly and crashed. After that, if I feel too tired, I force myself to take a break." (CN Interviewee 10)

This safety issue was intensified by the high volume of orders during peak hours, when workers may deliver more than 10 orders in one single trip. Meanwhile, the algorithmic system consistently shortened the delivery window of each order, compelling workers to race against time. This often led to risky behaviours and increased physical strain. As an interviewee explained:

"The Ele.me system keeps changing, and it is getting more demanding. During the lunch peak, they used to offer us 40-50 minutes for each order, but now by the time I pick up the meal, only 10 minutes are left – that's why I have to rush" (CN Interviewee 26)

Beyond physical exhaustion, workers also faced mental and emotional stress, stemming from the interactions with building security and demanding customers. One courier shared his repeated run-ins with security guards: *“They looked down on me. I’ve been stopped many times. They wouldn’t let me in unless I took off my helmet and uniform.”* (CN Interviewee 28). The pressure to maintain high customer satisfaction ratings added significantly to workers’ anxiety. Even small delays or spilled food could lead to complaints or bad reviews, which directly affected their earnings and job security. An interviewee explained the consequences of getting bad reviews in detail: *“I could lose ¥100-200 simply because a customer gives me a bad review. I always feel very stressful about that. Even when they are rude to me, I just have to put up with it – I can’t argue back.”* (CN Interviewee 8). Some customers also made unreasonable requests, expecting workers to perform errands beyond the scope of their food-delivery job. For instance, an interviewee described one such incident and felt frustrated when he was intimidated by a customer:

“One customer left a note asking me to buy cigarettes with the meal, but I didn’t have time. He threatened to give a bad review if I didn’t buy it for him... I know this is a service job, but it just feels upsetting.” (CN Interviewee 10)

These experiences reflect the demanding work conditions of food-delivery platform work in China, where workers were required to manage customer expectations, and deal with disrespect and stigma associated with this job.

Workers under outsourced arrangements often reported a relatively higher level of labour control exerted by the service station management. They were required to assemble every morning before starting food-delivery and fulfill the minimum online hours to keep their accounts active. Service station managers’ earnings were tied to riders’ performance, and

therefore workers were often encouraged to work for longer hours, finish more deliveries, and keep their ratings as high as possible. One interviewee further explained the pressure of reporting to the station manager when he got a bad review from a customer:

“I don’t like the way they [service station managers] manage us. The manager often ask me to explain what happened to the bad reviews I got, and I sometimes feel very annoyed because nothing happens. I don’t know why the customer gave a bad review, maybe just because they are unhappy with the food, or the weather.” (CN Interviewee 15)

However, the role of these managers were somewhat complex because some workers preferred to have this human role in dealing with special circumstances. For instance, a worker who built up a good relationship with his manager noted:

“They [managers] are not that bad. They can manually adjust the orders dispatched to us, and sometimes they act as a bridge to help us communicate with the platform, or maybe the station... For instance, when I injured my legs, my manager was quite understanding and let me take a few weeks off without any penalties.” (CN Interviewee 13)

In sum, rural-to-urban migrants’ experiences in food-delivery platform work were characterised by long hours, intense physical demands, and emotional strain. While the job offered income levels above the local minimum wage, this often came with excessively long working hours, tightened delivery times, and customer-driven performance pressures. These conditions reflected a similar pattern of precarious platform work observed in the Australian case. However, food-delivery workers in the Chinese case appeared to experience a higher degree of labour control and stricter operational rules, intensified by the highly competitive nature of platform work,

outsourced business model and minimal institutional protections. This created a labour regime that migrant workers needed to strategically navigate to improve their conditions.

7.5 Migration-related challenges

While the hukou system has traditionally been viewed as a major barrier to rural-to-urban migrants' access to employment, the interview data suggests a more complex reality. Most participants reported that their non-local *hukou* had limited impact on securing work in Guangzhou, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, hospitality or food-delivery. Instead, job opportunities were more commonly shaped by personal attributes such as skills, educational levels and social networks. For instance, one interviewee reflected:

“From my work experiences in a factory and a restaurant, I haven’t encountered any issues with my non-local hukou. In food-delivery, it doesn’t matter at all. In fact, some jobs mainly involve rural migrant workers, especially in the factory, where you can hardly see any locals.” (CN Interviewee 22)

The exclusionary nature of the *hukou* system in public sector roles (e.g., government) was widely acknowledged but dismissed as irrelevant: *“I’ve never tried applying for jobs that require a local hukou. Those jobs have nothing to do with me; they are mostly for high-skilled labour.”* (CN Interviewee 11). These responses suggest an implicit acceptance of the segmented urban labour market, where migrants readily identified themselves as suited to low-wage informal jobs. Rather than viewing this exclusion as inequitable, many appeared to normalise or anticipate their position within the lower tiers of a stratified labour market, which reflects the enduring impact of *hukou*-based social hierarchies and exclusions on rural migrant workers (Cheng & Selden, 1994; Fan, 2002).

However, the absence of formal legal barriers to employment did not lead to equal treatment or full inclusion of rural migrants. Migrants remained structurally marginalised in other key aspects of urban life, including housing, healthcare and education, where their *hukou* status entrenched precarity and restricted access to social entitlements available to urban residents.

First, rural migrants were ineligible for public rental housing due to their non-local *hukou*, forcing them into insecure and costly rental arrangements in private markets. One interviewee described the stress of unaffordable rent for his apartment: *“If I had a Guangzhou hukou, I could apply for the ‘public rental housing’, which could significantly lower my living cost, then I should be able to afford it without having to borrow money for rent payment.”* (CN Interviewee 5).

Second, access to healthcare was another challenge, particularly for those whose social insurance remained tied to their *hukou* in hometowns. Migrants thus often delayed or avoided immediate medical treatment in the city due to high out-of-pocket costs, opting instead to return to their hometowns to access healthcare services. As one worker explained: *“I bought my insurance in my hometown, so I went back to see a doctor and have surgery, which I could get most of the cost reimbursed.”* (CN Interviewee 8). Some migrants avoided participating in the local social security system, viewing it as a step only relevant for long-term settlers: *“I am still unsure if I will settle in Guangzhou. Buying social insurance is always tied to a long-term settlement plan.”* (CN Interviewee 21).

Lastly, migrants’ precarious status led to restricted education access. The *hukou* system limits non-local children’s entry into public schools in cities like Guangzhou, driving many families to leave children behind in their hometowns or pay additional fees for urban education.

One interviewee shared his disappointment after trying to secure a school spot for his child in the city:

“My child has stayed in our hometown for school. Without a Guangzhou hukou, we cannot access public schools here, and private ones are too expensive. I even tried to ask around for help, but they told me I’d need to pay more than ¥10k per year as a sponsorship fee, so I gave up.” (CN Interviewee 15)

These narratives reveal that although food-delivery platforms offered migrants access to work relatively free of *hukou*-based restrictions, the inclusion was conditional and sector-specific. In other crucial areas of urban life, including housing, healthcare, and education, migrants continued to experience systemic exclusion and institutionalised precarity. The *hukou* system thus often functions as a mechanism of labour segmentation and social stratification, pushing rural migrants to the margins of urban citizenship despite their contributions to the city’s economy.

Another major challenge faced by rural migrants was related to the points-based *hukou* system, which sets a high threshold for obtaining local *hukou* status in Guangzhou. While non-local migrants can legally reside in the city for extended periods without a local *hukou*, many still aspired to secure it due to its symbolic and practical significance. Under this system, migrants accumulate points based on criteria such as educational levels, professional qualifications, length of residence, continuous contributions to social insurance and tax systems, and home ownership. However, these requirements were unattainable for many of the food-delivery workers interviewed, whose informal employment arrangements, limited educational backgrounds, and unstable income streams prevented them from meeting the thresholds. One interviewee who had worked in Guangzhou for 7 years, described this challenge bluntly:

“Even though I’ve been here for years, getting a local hukou is like a dream I can’t reach. It’s mainly based on education and qualifications, but most of us doing delivery work don’t have a high level of education. So, no matter how hard I work, I just don’t have a chance.” (CN Interviewee 15)

This reflects a broader sense of exclusion shared by many migrants, who viewed the *hukou* not only as a mechanism for accessing public services, but also as a symbol of urban membership. However, the structural design of the system implicitly excluded those already at the margins of the labour market, reinforcing their status as permanent outsiders.

Despite having lived in the city for years, many expressed that true belonging remained elusive without *hukou*. As one interviewee noted, *“Only with a local hukou do I feel like I truly belong here. Even though I know getting one in Guangzhou is really difficult, I will try my best and see if I can sort it out in the future.”* (CN Interviewee 6). It reveals that while some rural migrants were committed to long-term settlement in Guangzhou, they were aware that the administrative barriers to *hukou* conversion significantly constrained their futures. The *hukou* system, in this context, also shaped migrants’ sense of social identity, and emotional connection to the city.

The institutional constraints on full urban citizenship rights extended to limitations in migrants’ social capital in Guangzhou. While few interviewees reported experiencing overt discrimination from local residents, many described feeling structurally disadvantaged in comparison to native-born urban residents. This disadvantage stemmed not only from disparities in education or qualifications, but also from their lack of social networks in the city that shaped access to employment and resources. One interviewee discussed the disparity in employment opportunities, noting that, *“Most locals have connections in society. Even if their educational*

level is the same as ours, they can still find more stable or better jobs through those connections” (CN Interviewee 14). Another interviewee further illustrated the divide: *“In some affluent residential areas like Liede and Yangji, the security jobs inside those compounds are reserved for locals. Outsiders like us don’t have a chance. You have to admit, they just naturally have access to better social resources”* (CN Interviewee 10). The lack of local connections thus restricted migrants’ job choices and reinforced their status as outsiders within the urban economic landscape.

In sum, the migration-related challenges faced by rural migrants in Guangzhou, ranging from restricted access to social welfare services to the lack of social capital, highlight the marginalisation these workers experienced despite their economic contributions in the city. While they were legally permitted to reside and work in Guangzhou, the institutional and social exclusions rooted in the *hukou* system and limited urban embeddedness constrained their opportunities and sense of belonging.

Comparatively, temporary migrant workers in Australia and rural-to-urban migrants in China were both positioned as outsiders in the receiving society, shaped by labour migration regimes that restrict their rights and protections. However, whereas exclusion in Australia often stemmed from legal temporariness and visa conditions, in China it was reinforced by an internal stratification system that ties full urban citizenship to *hukou* status, an aspiration that remained out of reach for many rural migrants despite long-term residency. These differences show the varied albeit largely similar ways in which labour migration regimes shaped migrants’ marginalisation across distinct national contexts.

7.6 Resilience

7.6.1 Work-related resilience

Similar to Chapter 6, the following sections use Katz's (2004) resilience, reworking and resistance framework to analyse agency expressions enacted by rural-to-urban migrants on Chinese food-delivery platforms. Resilience among Chinese migrant workers in the platform work sector was characterised by subtle, everyday practices that enabled them to cope with and navigate challenging work conditions without disrupting prevailing norms. These practices included both the normalisation of exploitative treatment and efforts at emotional adaptation, as well as the use of informal peer networks to mitigate everyday challenges.

A significant proportion of food-delivery workers have become accustomed to various forms of adversity, such as demanding customers and gruelling work hours, by normalising these challenges as inherent aspects of their jobs. One interviewee, for instance, described the process of becoming inured to difficult customers:

“I’ve been doing this job for a long time. Some customers can be very difficult, and initially, it upset me. Now, I just accept it as part of the job. Whether they threaten to leave a bad review or actually do, I don’t care. I just deliver the order, earn the money and move on” (CN Interviewee 30)

Similarly, acceptance of long working hours was widespread: *“I usually work from 10 am to 10 pm, and even later when it’s busy. Almost everyone doing well in this job works extremely long hours. It’s exhausting, but you get used to it. You wouldn’t make much money otherwise”* (CN Interviewee 26). Thus, most workers interviewed entered food-delivery work with an awareness of its demands, and they internalised the intense work conditions as inevitable and routine that must be accepted as normal when their income is solely dependent on this job.

Beyond financial motivations, some workers viewed food-delivery work as a form of emotional adaptation within restrictive social and economic conditions. An interviewee reflected on how the job helped him overcome his introverted personality: *“Working as a delivery rider enables me to meet new people and have some interactions with them – if someone talks with me, I’m very willing to have a chat”* (CN Interviewee 1). Another worker, a deaf rider who often ranked among the top 10 riders on the platform, viewed this job as an approach to affirm his self-worth and familial role: *“This job isn’t just about making ends meet; it is about proving to myself and my family that despite my physical disabilities, I can support the family and improve our lives. It gives me a sense of meaningfulness and accomplishment.”* (CN Interviewee 25). These narratives illustrate a form of resilience that imbued precarious work with emotional value and personal meaning, allowing workers to sustain themselves by finding dignity and value in the job despite limited prospects for upward mobility. Rather than instrumentalising the job for career advancement or transition, they built a sense of psychological endurance and self-recognition within the constraints of prolonged precarity. These emotional strategies are further conceptualised in the Discussion (Chapter 8) as different forms of resilience as opposed to those enacted by workers in the Australian case, reflecting migrant workers’ diverse temporal orientations and institutional structures in different national contexts.

Furthermore, many migrant workers drew on informal peer networks through daily work routines to cope with the everyday challenges of platform work. These connections were often formed through regular workplace encounters, such as working in the same district or shifts, rather than through shared origins. For instance, an interviewee recounted how his friendships with fellow riders started from repeated encounters at work: *“We saw each other many times a day – on the street, in the restaurants, or even delivering to the same building... Over time, we*

became friends and often had lunch together.” (CN Interviewee 28). These connections occasionally supported the exchange of tactical information about the delivery, such as how to manage complaints or maximise earnings – often during lunch breaks or in chat groups. As one worker further explained:

“I’ve learned some ‘tricks’ from more experienced riders, like when to file a complaint if the customer did not answer the call, in what circumstances we can keep the food without being punished, or which types of orders are easier to deliver and which areas to target for faster deliveries” (CN Interviewee 28)

Such interactions were, however, often transient and limited, formed around shared schedules rather than social ties with trust. The competitive nature of the platform work limited the development of deeper or more sustained cooperation. Some riders, particularly outsourced workers under station management, expressed a reluctance to share delivery tips due to concerns over losing orders, and reduced earnings and rankings:

“After all, we are in competition with each other, and I am not doing this job to make friends. So, I focus on completing my deliveries, rarely interacting with other riders... I don’t share delivery tips with others because it might reduce my orders. I usually don’t believe in the information they share as sometimes they may cheat you” (CN Interviewee 26)

As such, while informal peer interactions facilitated limited information sharing, they rarely fostered collective or solidaristic forms of coping. Work-related resilience in this context thus remained largely individualised, with peer networks providing short-term tactical value rather than long-term strategic and emotional support.

7.6.2 *Migration-related resilience*

While previous section examined how migrant platform workers enacted resilience in relation to the platform work organisation, their coping strategies extended beyond the workplace to the broader conditions of rural-to-urban migration. An important aspect of migration-related resilience among rural-to-urban migrant workers was their reliance on networks of *laoxiang* or fellow villagers, whose presence often provided both emotional grounding and some practical support in navigating the exclusions associated with migration and integrating into new urban environments.

For many migrants interviewed, *laoxiang* connections facilitated their initial transition into urban life by providing basic logistical support such as job finding and accommodation. One interviewee described the practical benefits of these ties: *“When I first came to Guangzhou, it was my cousin who helped me settle in. He introduced me to the delivery job and helped me find a place to live. Without him, I wouldn’t even know where to start”* (CN Interviewee 8). However, beyond this initial phase, the practical utility of *laoxiang* networks appeared limited. Several workers described a shift from exclusive reliance on *laoxiang* ties towards more diverse networks formed with people met in the city, regardless of hometown origins (i.e., *laoxiang*): *“I don’t think it makes a huge difference whether someone is from my hometown or not. I get help from friends, no matter where they come from. It’s more about the person you make friends with than where they are from”* (CN Interviewee 14). This suggests a reconfiguration of informal social support, shifting from ethnically or regionally bounded ties to more functionally oriented relationships that offer tangible assistance. Unlike co-ethnic enclaves in the Australian context, which often served as a practical base for securing housing, work, or migration advice, *laoxiang*

networks among internal migrants in China lied more in emotional buffering rather than strategic advancement.

Although *laoxiang* may not consistently provide strategic or institutional support, they remained as valuable sources of emotional anchors for migrants coping with exclusion and uncertainty. In a city where rural migrants remain socially marginalised, the shared dialect, cuisine, and customs within *laoxiang* communities fostered a sense of familiarity for many interviewees. As one worker shared: “*We talk about our lives, our families back home. There’s an instant connection among us when we speak in our dialect.*” (CN Interviewee 26). These affective connections helped maintain a sense of belonging and cultural identity in the face of social isolation and homesickness. However, these ties rarely transformed into cohesive collective action or strong mutual aid. In contrast to earlier generations of migrants who often clustered around *laoxiang*-based residential areas accompanied with mutual support, the group of migrant platform workers interacted within looser and more transient networks.

In sum, migration-related resilience among Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers was supported by a dual set of informal networks. *Laoxiang* connections contributed to emotional adaptation and, for some, assisted with basic logistical needs, while broader friendship networks, not necessarily bound by origin, offered practical help in day-to-day urban survival. These informal support systems did not directly stem from the *hukou* regime or other institutional structures, but they interacted with these frameworks by filling emotional and practical gaps left by state exclusion. As such, social networks should be understood as second-order conditions of resilience as they were necessary scaffolds that helped sustain workers in the absence of formal protections.

7.7 Reworking

7.7.1 Work-related reworking

Migrant platform workers in China adopted a range of reworking strategies to improve their income, work conditions and autonomy within the constraints of the platform economy. These strategies involved tactics to navigate rating systems and avoid penalties, transitions between jobs and platforms, and adjustments to working modes. Such actions reflected workers' efforts to enhance their material circumstances without directly confronting the structural foundations of platform work.

One form of reworking among those interviewed involved tactics that helped workers maximise their income or reduce inefficiencies. Some workers chose to work during peak hours or in bad weather, when demand was higher and fewer workers were available, thereby increasing the chances of higher earnings: *“When it looks like it’s about to rain, we go offline and then come back online once it starts raining and the platform begins offering bonuses. This way, we can get the best rates for delivery.”* (CN Interviewee 23). Others avoided difficult or time-consuming orders by cancelling them at a small personal cost. As one rider explained:

“If I anticipate an order will be hard to deliver, such as when I need to deal with security guys, walk up and deliver to the door, I will just pay 10 yuan to cancel the orders. During the lunch peak, I only take orders that can be dropped off at the entrance of office buildings for higher efficiency.” (CN Interviewee 2)

These strategic decisions to adapt working hours and cancel unfavourable orders demonstrate workers' navigation of platform rules to optimise their earnings. Furthermore, workers often took proactive steps to avoid customer complaints or poor ratings, which can lead to penalties. One rider described how he handled delayed or spilled orders:

“When I realise I am going to be late, or if something spilled, I apologise to the customer and offer them a small gift – like a bottle of water or a yogurt. Or sometimes I just transfer them money as compensation. It’s better to lose a little [money] than to get a bad review.” (CN Interviewee 13)

Another worker shared how he managed the requirements for his online hours during periods when he could not work: *“When I was doing zhuan song deliveries, I had to stay online for a minimum number of hours everyday. If I couldn’t meet that, I would ask a friend to log into my account and finish a few orders for me.”* (CN Interviewee 27). These examples illustrate the strategic acts workers took to sustain their performance metrics and secure continued access to work opportunities. However, a few interviewees further reflected on how these acts had intensified the competition among workers and worsened their conditions when most riders improved their efficiencies broadly: *“I don’t think those tactics can really improve our circumstances. When we all know how to perform well, the system keeps increasing the standards for ‘good performance’, pressing us to maximise our productivity and show more compliant behaviours.”* (CN Interviewee 30).

Many workers left previous employment sectors in search of better work conditions in platform work. This shift was often driven by the desire for flexibility, reduced supervision, and/or higher income. For example, one worker reflected on his decision to quit his job in the catering industry:

“I was tired of being constantly supervised while working. After 5 years working in restaurants, I was exhausted and wanted something different. I chose food-delivery because there’s no one watching over me, and it feels like I am my own boss.” (CN Interviewee 29)

Such mobility also reflects broader strategies shaped by workers' migration trajectories and temporal horizons. For migrants planning to settle in Guangzhou permanently, transitioning out of food-delivery is a strategic move tied to *hukou* aspirations. Formal, stable employment is a critical criterion in Guangzhou's points-based *hukou* system, motivating aspirational settlers to take up a more secure job while using food-delivery work only as supplementary income. As one worker explained: *"I started a job in a logistics company last month because it's a more formal, secure job, which could probably help me with hukou conversion in the future. I do food-delivery part-time in the evenings to earn extra money."* (CN Interviewee 27). By contrast, for migrants who maintained a more flexible and contingent outlook on their stay in Guangzhou, platform work was viewed as a job to maximise earnings in the short term, especially given its relatively high income compared to other jobs. One interviewee described: *"I worked in a retail shop in Foshan, but the pay was too low, so I came to Guangzhou for food-delivery. Here, I can make much more if I work hard."* (CN Interviewee 21). These exit practices represented acts of reworking through efforts to align work choices with personal priorities, imagined futures, and opportunities shaped by migration status.

Within the platform economy, acts of reworking also involved moving between different food-delivery platforms to access more favourable working conditions. For instance, a rider who switched from Meituan to Ele.me explained: *"I used to work on Meituan, but the bundled orders and routes were too exhausting. I switched to Ele.me because the work here is more manageable and less tiring."* (CN Interviewee 3). Conversely, several workers made the opposite move from Ele.me to Meituan for its higher order volume and earning potential. Despite different preferences, these transitions reflected a shared strategy of evaluating and choosing platforms that best aligned with workers' personal priorities and economic goals.

A distinct feature of the Chinese case was workers' ability to switch between delivery modes, specifically between *zhuansong* (outsourced delivery) and *zhongbao* (crowdsourced delivery). These modes differed significantly in terms of structure, worker management, delivery work organisation, and income distribution, enabling workers to select arrangements that better align with their needs and expectations for workload. One worker explained his decision to leave *zhuansong*:

"I don't like zhuansong. They [the platform] held my wages, required me to attend daily meetings for check-ins, and report to a manager all the time. The working rules were strict, and the orders mostly went to those top riders. The rest of us barely got good orders. So I switched to zhongbao – it's much more flexible, despite potentially lower income." (CN Interviewee 7)

This shift reveals how workers actively responded to perceived inequities and inefficiencies within platform structures.

Finally, social networks also played an important role in enabling these transitions. Several workers interviewed relied on the experiences and advice of peers when considering a move into platform work or determining which platform or work mode to join. One interviewee shared how he started this job: *"I used to work as a cook in a restaurant, and my co-worker left to do food-delivery. After the restaurant closed down, he asked me to try food-delivery and guided me throughout the starting period."* (CN Interviewee 28). Such social connections provided valuable information and resources, enabling migrant workers to navigate their employment decisions. However, they also channelled migrants into similarly precarious sectors, reinforcing occupational concentration and constraining their access to more secure employment.

In sum, migrant platform workers in China engaged in reworking by adopting a combination of income-maximising tactics, switching jobs or platforms and adjusting working modes. These actions were not aiming for radical change but rather reflected pragmatic recalibrations within the existing labour system aimed at improving earnings and work conditions without challenging the platform work structures.

7.7.2 Migration-related reworking

Migration-related reworking among Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers often involved navigating institutional constraints to pursue urban integration and, for some, permanent residency through acquiring local urban *hukou* in Guangzhou.

Purchasing property was an approach adopted by some workers who saw this as a pathway towards *hukou* eligibility under certain municipal policies. This strategy was often motivated by family-related aspirations, especially securing better education for children, as *hukou* status is tied to access to public schools. As one interviewee explained: “*We are planning to buy an apartment in Guangzhou, which makes it easier to obtain a local hukou. It is mainly for our son. He can then go to public school here with the Guangzhou hukou*” (CN Interviewee 10). This example illustrates how property ownership was used not merely for residential purposes, but as a means to obtain local *hukou* and access to urban public education. However, for most rural migrants, particularly those engaged in low-wage platform work, buying property in major cities remained financially out of reach. Among the interviewees, only a small minority – two participants who ran small businesses and used platform work as a supplementary income – were able to pursue urban *hukou* through property purchases. Thus, while this was one form of

reworking aimed at securing local *hukou*, it was largely limited to a relatively privileged subset of migrant workers.

A more common and incremental strategy involved participation in the social security system to fulfill the criteria under Guangzhou's points-based *hukou* scheme. This scheme rewards long-term local contributions, such as social insurance payments, residential stability, and community engagement, with points that may eventually make a migrant eligible to apply for local *hukou*. One interviewee described the steps his family was taking to maximise their points:

“My child is living back in [hometown], mainly because I don't have local hukou here. But my wife and I really want him to be with us, so now we're doing everything we can to collect points. We paid for social security here and moved from Haizhu to Panyu district because that gives us extra points. I donate blood and do volunteer work every year – together they can add 20 points... It's a slow process, but we believe it's possible.” (CN Interviewee 27)

These narratives underscore the effort required to navigate the *hukou* system. While many rural migrants engaged in these acts, several participants acknowledged the high uncertainty on *hukou* conversion. They described a process that is slow, costly and unpredictable, but felt they had to “try their best”. For example, one worker explained: *“We've been paying social security for several years in Guangzhou, but no one can say when or whether we can succeed. It's hard, but if we don't do these things, there's no chance at all.”* (CN Interviewee 26). This reflects how rural migrants invested significant time and resources to signal compliance with *hukou*-based institutional framework even when they recognised that success is unlikely. The current *hukou* policies disproportionately favour highly skilled professionals, making formal urban inclusion

through these mechanisms practically unattainable for most low-skilled platform workers. These experiences reveal how the institutional design of *hukou* systems effectively limited rural migrant workers' capacity to achieve stable, long-term residency in cities.

Moreover, engagement in migration-related reworking was closely tied to workers' temporal horizons. Those with short-term plans or who viewed their stay in Guangzhou as temporary were less likely to invest in long-term strategies such as property purchase or the urban social security system. In contrast, *hukou*-related reworking reflected a sustained and prolonged commitment to reshaping their future in Guangzhou, often motivated by family aspirations. These patterns highlighted how reworking strategies were shaped not only by institutional structures but also by migrants' own life-course considerations and settlement intentions.

In sum, these findings illustrate how rural migrant workers in China reworked their migration trajectories in pursuit of more stable and secure lives, even when institutional pathways to urban inclusion remained highly restricted. Their reworking practices often involved long-term compliance and engagement within an institutional framework that keeps the threshold of full urban citizenship high for rural migrants.

7.8 Resistance

7.8.1 Work-related resistance

In the Chinese platform economy, rural-to-urban migrant workers engaged in subtle, everyday acts of work-related resistance to navigate algorithmic control, demanding customer rating systems and workplace rules. Though not openly confrontational, these tactics demonstrate how workers disrupted the operational management of the platform and challenge the exploitative

work conditions through covert forms of resistance to improve their working conditions and reassert control over their work. Four different forms of resistance were observed, including manipulating timing systems, circumventing uniform requirements, managing problematic orders, and, less frequently, challenging subcontracted service stations.

Similar to the Australian case, a common tactic involved gaming the platform's timing mechanisms to avoid penalties for late pickups or deliveries. To buy additional time or optimise delivery routes, riders often pre-emptively marked orders as 'picked up' or 'delivered' before they arrived. One worker explained the process:

“When I’m running behind, I sometimes click ‘delivered’ before I get there. Of course, I will ask customers for permission before I do so. I usually call them and let them know. But now it’s harder to do this because the platform improved the algorithms. If you’re too far away from the destination, the system won’t let you do so because it tracks your location.” (CN Interviewee 12)

Another practice of resistance was the strategic non-compliance with platform-mandated uniforms. Riders were required to wear standardised branded jackets and helmets at all times, enforced through periodic photo checks. However, many riders bypassed this requirement and only put on the uniform temporarily for photo verifications to improve the efficiency. As one interviewee explained:

“They occasionally ask for a selfie to check the uniform. But most of use just keep it in the delivery box and only put it on for the photo. It’s easier to move around without it. For example, some apartment buildings don’t let us in, but if I am not in uniform, I can just pretend to be a resident and get in.” (CN Interviewee 3)

Workers also developed strategies for dealing with non-responsive customers or ambiguous orders. These practices aimed to minimise time loss and sustain their ratings, even by bending platform protocols. One rider outlined his approach to unreachable customers:

“If someone doesn’t answer two or three calls, I just report it as ‘unable to contact’ and move on. Whatever he/she ordered becomes mine. The order could be cancelled without affecting my rating, depending on how the platform process my request.” (CN Interviewee 28)

Similarly, some riders chose not to fulfill deliveries with unclear addresses, considering orders as unclaimed and taking these for themselves: *“When I see an order with a confusing or obviously wrong address, I just don’t deliver it. It’s not worth wasting time searching around.”* (CN Interviewee 2). These practices demonstrate how workers worked out their own ways to avoid penalties or increase earnings by subtly resisted full compliance to platform rules. These subtle forms of rule defiance either challenged the operation of platforms’ algorithmic system or disrupted the platforms’ regulatory mechanisms, exemplifying everyday resistance enacted within platform work.

A relatively rare but most direct form of resistance involved confronting the platform’s service stations over fines or perceived unfair treatment. One rider recounted an incident where he was penalised for a customer complaint under Meituan’s outsourced arrangements. In response, he filed a formal complaint and eventually switched to the more flexible crowdsourced mode to avoid further station-level control:

“When I worked as a zhuan song [outsourced] rider on Meituan, after receiving a bad review, the station fined me over ¥1700. I filed a complaint against the station and reported it to the platform. After that, three stations in Longkou district blacklisted me, so

I couldn't work there anymore. So, I switched to zhongbao [crowdsourced], – it's more independent and I don't have to deal with the station managers.” (CN Interviewee 2)

The act of switching working modes was primarily a reworking practice as discussed earlier, but the formal complaint signalled a limited form of resistance that directly challenged platform managerial authority and sought for redress. Although this act did not lead to any radical changes in subcontracting practices or broader collective actions, it demonstrates how individualised tactics can blur the boundary between reworking and resistance.

Despite the prevalence of these everyday individual acts of resistance, similar to the Australian case, none of the interviewees in the Chinese case reported being union members or having participated in any form collective mobilisation such as strikes or protests. When asked about this absence, most participants showed a limited understanding of what unions are or how they could have included food-delivery workers. They mostly saw union membership as irrelevant or non-accessible. For instance, an interviewee expressed surprise when the topic was raised: *“A union? I thought that's for people working in big companies or government jobs. I've never heard of any riders being in a union. Is it for us? Do you mean we as food-delivery workers can also join in?” (CN Interviewee 23)*. This lack of awareness reflects broader institutional constraints within China's industrial relations landscape, where unions are not independent and less accessible to informal or non-standard workers in the platform economy (China Labour Bulletin, 2023; Liu, 2021).

When it came to informal forms of collective actions, such as self-organised strikes via log-offs, many interviewees showed strong concern over risks involved. For instance, *zhuan-song* riders who are outsourced and managed by service stations feared immediate reprisals from

station managers if they were seen as absent or non-compliant. One interviewee explained his concern in detail:

“If we all log off to protest or strike, the station would know right away. It’s like your boss will immediately know when you skip work. They can penalise us by allocating less orders, taking away shifts, or even banning the account for a few days. I can’t take that risk because I need this job. (CN Interviewee 16)

Such concern underscores how the outsourced model and managerial system constrained collective organising, rendering resistance largely individualised and unorganised.

In sum, while workers often developed tactical resistance acts embedded in their daily routines to navigate the constraints imposed by platforms, the managerial arrangements on platforms, combined with the absence of collective mechanisms, constrained workers’ collective actions in this context.

7.8.2 Migration-related resistance

In addition to acts of resistance at workplace, this section explores migration-related practices enacted by rural migrant platform workers that sought to circumvent the *hukou*-related rules, particularly through informal or illegal approaches.

While prior research has documented some rule-bending acts in obtaining urban *hukou*, such as forging educational certificates or employment relationships, or engaging in sham marriage (He, 2011; Jiang, 2013), no examples of such practices emerged among the interviewees in this study. Instead, for those who aspired to gain a local *hukou* in Guangzhou, they often showed compliance with the rules and step-by-step attempts to meet the criteria set by the points-based *hukou* system. One key reason for the absence of rule-bending behaviours

appeared to be the perceived risks involved. When asked about the use of alternative approaches in obtaining *hukou*, some interviewees viewed them as too risky or unrealistic. As one worker explained:

“I am following the rules to accumulate points... I don’t want to take those shortcuts and break the law. I’ve heard that years ago, some people bought hukou from the agent by using fake certificates. But that was a long time ago. Things are different now, everything is digitalised, and all the systems are connected. If you try something like that, I am sure you will get caught.” (CN Interviewee 13)

This narrative reflects how the increasing digitalisation have closed off the informal or illegal pathways that previously enabled some migrants to manipulate the *hukou* system. Therefore, the overt rule-bending behaviour was deterred by the legal risks involved.

The absence of reported migration-related resistance among migrant platform workers, however, could be explained by a reluctance to disclose any engagement in illegal practices, especially to an interviewer. Throughout the interviews, most participants appeared hesitant to talk about potentially law-breaking behaviours, demonstrating their concerns over the repercussion of breaking the law.

In sum, the absence of overt migration-related resistance in this study highlights how structural and technological constraints narrowed the scope of resistance acts available to precarious rural migrant workers. Therefore, for most migrant food-delivery workers, everyday efforts focused more on enduring exclusion, tactically reworking work conditions, or making incremental efforts to meet points-based criteria for local *hukou* rather than directly confronting or circumventing the *hukou* system. This highlights how the institutional system channelled

migrant platform workers' agency primarily towards coping and adaptation, rather than overt rule-bending. This is further analysed in the comparative discussion in the following chapter.

7.9 Summary

This chapter has explored how rural-to-urban migrant workers in China's platform economy engaged with work and migration life under the constraints of urban precarity and institutional exclusion. Migrants were motivated by a combination of economic pressures, career advancement, and family ties, but these motivations were informed by different temporal horizons. Some viewed their stay in Guangzhou as temporary, aimed at short-term income accumulation before returning to their hometowns. Others adopted an opportunistic, flexible approach, while a third group expressed a desire to settle permanently in the city, albeit often deterred by barriers to *hukou* conversion and access to urban social entitlements.

Platform work experiences were characterised by long hours, modest pay, physical risks and emotional stress, yet many rural migrants internalised these conditions as acceptable or even preferable given the limited job alternatives available to them in cities. The chapter identified resilience practices such as emotional endurance, goal-oriented framing of work and reliance on *laoxiang* networks. Reworking was observed in navigating platforms' operational systems, changing jobs, platforms or work modes to improve their work conditions and maximise incomes. Migration-related reworking involved attempts to obtain *hukou*, often through property ownership or compliance with the points-based *hukou* schemes. Acts of resistance were primarily observed at work through bending platform rules, while largely absent in the migration-related domain due to the perceived risks involved.

These findings highlight how migrant agency in China was shaped by a distinct migration regime, one that formally allows internal free movement but reproduces structural exclusion through the *hukou* system and segmented labour markets. Compared to their international counterparts in Australia, Chinese rural-to-urban migrants enjoyed greater mobility but still faced institutional barriers to urban integration and settlement. As such, their agency tended to be more inwardly adaptive and less confrontational, reflecting the constraints and possibilities shaped by a hierarchically structured internal labour migration regime. The next chapter provides a comparative discussion of both cases, drawing together the threads of resilience, reworking and resistance to analyse how labour migration regimes shape the agency expressions of migrant platform workers.

CHAPTER 8 Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on and synthesises the findings presented in Chapter 6 and 7 to examine how migrant platform workers in Australia and China exercised agency under structurally constrained conditions. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of labour agency in Chapter 3, this chapter presents a comparative analysis of how migrant food-delivery workers in Australia and China navigated platform precarity and institutional constraints, and the distinct forms of agency they were engaged in. This will help answer the research question, which will be returned to in the concluding chapter (Chapter 9).

This thesis adopts a novel comparative approach by juxtaposing the experiences of migrant platform workers under international and internal labour migration regimes to examine how distinct institutional frameworks shape their agency expressions. Although existing debates and literature about the nature of Australia and China's labour market and migration regimes

highlight that the countries have markedly different labour migration regimes, what the findings chapters (Chapters 7 & 8) have highlighted is that the two regimes produce markedly similar outcomes for migrant food-delivery workers and their agency expressions. In the Australian international labour migration regime, temporary migrants navigate a stratified visa system and their mobility is constrained by restricted work rights, skill recognition barriers and reduced bargaining power, leading to a guest-worker regime where migrants are often concentrated in low-skilled precarious sectors (Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Wright & Clibborn, 2020). Similarly, in China’s internal labour migration regime, rural-to-urban migrants face institutional exclusion under the *hukou* system, which remains a formidable barrier to upward mobility of rural migrants, often confining them to low-wage, insecure informal jobs (Chan, 2009; Wang & Fan, 2012). Rather than viewing these labour migration regimes as contextual backdrops, this chapter foregrounds them as integral components shaping the conditions, possibilities and limits of labour agency. To frame this comparative discussion, Table 8.1 below provides a reminder of the key characteristics of the two labour migration regimes as they pertain to the regulation of migrant food-delivery workers, which was discussed earlier in Chapter 5.

Table 8.1: Key dimensions of migrant platform workers in Australia and China

Dimensions	Australia International temporary migrants on platform work	China Rural-to-urban migrants on platform work
Type of migration	International migration	Internal migration
Institutional temporariness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short-term visas (e.g., student, working holiday makers, graduate visas, usually 2-4 years) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indefinite legal work rights and residency rights

Legal status & job mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working rights governed by visa categories (e.g., student, working holiday maker) • Constrained mobility due to visa restrictions, often in low-skilled sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No formal restrictions on employment rights • Restricted access to some public sectors (e.g., government jobs) • Limited upward mobility, often in low-wage and labour-intensive sectors
Employment rights & protections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disproportionately high rights violations e.g., underpayment • Weak enforcement by Fair Work Ombudsman • Limited union presentation and collective bargaining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disproportionately high rights violations e.g., unpaid wages • Widespread absence of formal labour contracts among rural migrants • No independent unions, low union membership • Weak legal recourse for informal workers
Access to social welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partial or no access to social welfare entitlements for temporary migrants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic exclusion from urban social welfare entitlements
Permanency pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly narrowed pathways that favour high-skilled migrants • Frequent policy changes, uncertain outcomes • Many remain in ‘long-term temporariness’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pathways to urban <i>hukou</i> are limited and stratified by city tier: extremely high threshold in mega cities (e.g. Shanghai, Guangzhou) • Urban <i>hukou</i> favours stable employment, high-educated, high-skilled workers • Protracted <i>hukou</i> transition process, liminal status between urban and rural lives • Many are <i>de facto</i> urban residents, but not <i>de jure</i> citizens

The findings of this study highlight two key insights. First, despite the different institutional contexts of Australia’s international migration regime and China’s internal migration regime, migrant food-delivery platform workers across both contexts experience similar outcomes in terms of platform precarity, marginalised migrant status, and constrained agency.

Second, despite these shared conditions of vulnerability, their acts of agency differ. These differences are not reducible to individual preferences but are institutionally shaped by the structural design of labour migration regimes and the temporal horizons migrant workers preserve. By drawing together the findings on everyday endurance and coping mechanisms, tactical navigation of work and life conditions, and strategic resistance against platform rules and migration rules, this chapter advances comparative insights of how national labour migration regimes, along with workers' temporalities, shape not only the challenges and opportunities available to migrant platform workers, but also the types and forms of agency they express.

This chapter identifies common acts observed under each form of agency across countries and organises them into different sub-themes to further explore the similarities and/or variations in such patterns, followed by investigating the reasons, particularly in relation to the impacts of labour migration regimes and temporality. This chapter is structured around the three categories of agency under Katz's (2004) framework of resilience, reworking and resistance. Section 8.2 focuses on resilience, detailing how migrant platform workers endure structural constraints through emotional coping strategies and social networks. Section 8.3 examines reworking, through which workers tactically manoeuvre within platform structures or shift across jobs to improve their conditions. Section 8.4 explores resistance, exploring acts that confront or subvert the power structures of platforms and labour migration regimes, ranging from subtle digital subversion to migration-related rule-bending. Each section offers a cross-national analysis of how migrant workers engage with these forms of agency, with particular focus on how their agency strategies are shaped by migration motivations, institutional constraints, and workers' temporal horizons. In doing so, the chapter reveals how migrants' agency practices diverge in

form, function, and temporality, reflecting the distinct institutional architectures and temporality embedded in each labour migration regime.

8.2 Resilience

This section examines how migrant workers in Australia and China exhibited resilience in navigating platform precarity and the broader structural conditions imposed by the labour migration regimes. Drawing on Katz's (2004) framework, resilience is understood as a form of agency characterised by enduring and adapting to constraints through everyday coping strategies without actively changing them. The analysis here identifies two key forms of resilience that were observed across both contexts: emotional response and meaning-making, and social networks supporting resilience. While these similar patterns of resilience are common across the two countries, a cross-country comparison reveals how differences in institutional structures and migrants' temporal horizons shaped the form and meanings of these agency expressions.

8.2.1 Emotional response and meaning-making

Across both Australia and China, migrant platform workers engaged in similar acts of resilience, particularly through emotional strategies that enabled them to psychologically endure precarious conditions and reframe the meaning of platform work within their broader migration trajectories. As shown in existing literature on platform workers (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020), such emotional endurance is conceptualised as *resilience* (Katz, 2004), a critical form of agency through which workers get by or adapt to unfavourable conditions without actively transforming them. However, these similar practices are shaped by distinct motivations for migration, institutional structures, and temporal horizons, and thus manifest differently in

different contexts. In the Australian case, migrant workers' emotional strategies are often *instrumental* and *transitional*, supported by aspirations for personal development and the perceived temporariness of platform work. In contrast, internal rural migrants in China exhibit more *normalised* and *prolonged* endurance, shaped by structural immobility and a constrained view of their future pathways. Building on and extending Katz's framework, these four variant forms of resilience capture the contingent and temporally embedded ways that migrant workers endure and make sense of precarity.

In the Australian context, emotional strategies of resilience are often *instrumental* and *transitional*. Migrant workers tolerated the inferior conditions of platform work, such as customer rudeness, unstable income, or long work hours, because they viewed the job as a temporary solution and use it as an 'arrival infrastructure' to enter the host labour market (van Doorn & Vijay, 2024) or a 'stepping stone' towards more stable employment and secured life (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2021). At the same time, platform work was often interpreted as instrumentally valuable, repurposed by migrants as a means to pursue broader personal goals, such as saving for travel, funding education or engaging in urban exploration. The findings align with observations by Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) that some migrants reframed the liminal situations into opportunities and exemplify what Axelsson et al. (2017) conceptualised as 'projective agency', wherein migrant workers endure present hardship as trade-offs for future possibilities.

The diverse motivations for migration help explain the different meanings workers attach to platform work. As shown earlier, many international migrants in Australia engaged in platform work as part of broader trajectories tied to personal development, education, or transnational mobility, thus enabling migrants to see platform work as a means to achieve other

goals. These framings of resilience are shaped not only by migrants' individual aspirations, but also by the structural conditions within the Australian labour migration regimes. On the one hand, the institutional temporariness of visa categories such as student and working holiday visas, facilitate a transitional orientation in how migrants perceive both their stay and the work they undertake (Robertson, 2015; Robertson et al., 2018). On the other hand, these visa categories are perceived as providing institutional pathways, albeit increasingly narrow and restricted, towards longer-term stay or permanent settlement through transition to skilled visas or other migration pathways (Khoo et al., 2008; Robertson, 2014). Therefore, it enables a future-oriented mindset of a subset of migrants, who strategically interpret platform work as a transient phase in a broader migration trajectory or towards getting longer-term benefits. In this context, the Australian regulatory environment helps sustain the transitional and instrumental nature of migrants' emotional endurance.

By contrast, emotional strategies among rural-to-urban migrant workers in China are more commonly characterised by *normalised* and *prolonged* endurance. Unlike workers in Australia who perceived platform work as a temporary phase towards upward mobility, many migrant workers in China accepted exploitative conditions as routine and internalised these challenges as part of their urban lives that were unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. This finding resonates with earlier studies on factory workers in China, which similarly revealed a tendency among rural migrants to endure inferior conditions and view such hardship as an inevitable part of rural-to-urban migration due to their marginalised social status (Ngai, 1999; Ngai & Chan, 2012).

This normalisation of precarity in China is closely tied to rural-to-urban migrants' motivation for migration, constrained temporal horizons and limited structural mobility under the

rural-urban institutional divide. As found in this study, rural-to-urban migrants were often driven by economic necessity and familial obligations, and thus they engaged in platform work to sustain themselves in cities in the absence of better alternative jobs or exit strategies. The *hukou* system, which restricts rural migrants' access to urban welfare entitlements and certain employment sectors (e.g., civil service and government), entrenches rural–urban divides and creates significant barriers to upward mobility in cities (Démurger et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2015). For those who expressed aspirations to settle in Guangzhou, the feasibility of obtaining local *hukou* was often constrained by a lack of legal, economic, and social pathways to urban *hukou* transition, and the process was often cumulative and protracted (Chan, 2009; Li et al., 2022). Thus, many interviewees adopted a pragmatic and present-focused mindset of ‘taking one step at a time’, indicating an absence of structured long-term planning under the restrictive *hukou* system. While some mentioned eventually returning to their hometowns to start businesses, these intentions were frequently postponed, vague, or expressed without concrete planning, reflecting their liminal status between rural and urban lives (Chan, 2010a). Platform work, in this context, is less frequently perceived as a strategic choice that helps achieve personal goals; rather, it is accepted as a tolerable, if undesirable, long-term means to sustain themselves within structural immobility. The emotional resilience exhibited by these workers is thus grounded in accepting and adapting to precarious conditions that are expected to persist (i.e., prolonged resilience).

While migrants in both contexts can be categorised into similar temporal cohorts, such as returners, aspirational settlers, or those with uncertain outlooks, the institutional meanings and implications of these horizons differ. In Australia, return-oriented migrants viewed their stay as a temporary phase within a broader trajectory, with platform work as a strategic means to maximise savings or to support other goals before returning home. These migrants often retained

agency over the timing and purpose of their return, and their emotional endurance was thus transitional and instrumental in nature. By contrast, return intentions among Chinese internal migrant workers were often reactive, shaped by structural constraints such as unaffordable rent, or exclusions from *hukou-based* welfare. In this instance, their return-home orientation often came with frustration and uncertainty, reinforcing a form of normalised and prolonged endurance as coping mechanisms.

Similarly, those who aspired to settle permanently experienced distinct institutional conditions that shaped their different emotional coping strategies. In Australia, despite the staggered and uncertain nature of the migration process (Robertson, 2014, 2019), the flexibility of platform work enables migrants to sustain themselves in ‘long-term temporariness’ (Mares, 2016) while coping with shifting migration policies. The institutional possibility supported a transitional mindset, in which emotional endurance was framed as temporary and goal oriented. Conversely, in China, rural migrants who aspired to settle in large cities like Guangzhou faced particularly high barriers to obtaining local *hukou*, with reforms either poorly implemented or effectively inaccessible to low-skilled workers, resulting in an often protracted *hukou* conversion process (Li & Chen, 2024; Zhang & Tao, 2012). As a result, their desires for *de jure* permanent residency with local *hukou* led to prolonged endurance of precarity and exclusion.

These findings highlight that migrant workers’ temporal horizons do not operate independently. Their impacts on agency expressions (e.g., transitional or prolonged resilience) are contingent on the institutional infrastructures, such as the migration pathways, welfare entitlements, and policy changes, that shape their imagined futures, mobility, and how such horizons can be acted upon. This comparison builds upon and contributes to temporal approaches in migration and labour agency scholarship, which mostly focused on migrants’ temporal

eligibilities and restrictions in a migration process (Robertson, 2014, 2019; Triandafyllidou, 2022), by revealing how migrants' temporal horizons interact with institutional structures to shape expressions of agency. The study also responds to calls for a more contextualised analysis of agency by incorporating workers' motivations for migration and their broader migration trajectories into the analysis (Bonhomme et al., 2025; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010). While labour agency is often theorised in relation to workers' efforts to improve their employment conditions, this study shows that migrants' emotional resilience cannot be fully understood without recognising the broader socio-economic contexts that drive migration and shape how workers interpret their current circumstances, emphasising agency as temporally and socially embedded.

Lastly, the findings build on Katz's (2004) framework by developing a more differentiated account of resilience, as summarised in Table 8.2, to capture the temporal, institutional and motivational dimensions of resilience among migrant platform workers. Existing studies have applied Katz's conceptualisation of resilience to analyse migrant workers' general coping strategies in response to inferior or precarious working conditions (e.g., Rydzik & Anitha, 2020; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). Rather than viewing resilience as a uniform response, this study extends Katz's (2004) framework by introducing the concepts of *transitional* and *instrumental* resilience, in which workers in the Australian case adopted short-term coping strategies in pursuit of an anticipated goal or transition. It also introduces the concepts of *normalised* and *prolonged* resilience to describe in the Chinese case the habitual endurance of precarious conditions without clear prospects for exit, which is often shaped by their constrained long-term horizons. This differentiation helps demonstrate the contingent nature of resilience shaped by institutional structures (e.g., labour migration regimes, policy changes) and the temporality of migrants' lives. By situating resilience within migrant workers' temporal

horizons, this differentiation in forms of emotional response also contributes a temporal lens to the study of migrant agency by showing how time structures both the expressions and the meanings of emotional endurance.

Table 8.2: Comparisons between forms of resilience in emotional responses and meaning-making among migrant platform workers

Resilience Type	Definition
Instrumental resilience	Using platform work instrumentally as a means to achieve broader migration or personal goals while enduring current precarity.
Normalised resilience	Accepting precarity as a normal and unavoidable condition of platform work and rural-to-urban migration life.
Transitional resilience	Coping strategies adopted with the expectation of moving on to better work or life opportunities in the future; job and precarious conditions perceived as transitional.
Prolonged resilience	Prolonged endurance over extended periods due to limited structural mobility and constrained settlement prospects.

8.2.2 Social networks supporting resilience

While the resilience of migrant platform workers was primarily enacted through their sense-making and everyday endurance of precarious working conditions, in both contexts, these workers drew on informal social networks as an important, though secondary, means of coping with precarity. These networks, whether composed of co-ethnic peers, *laoxiang* ties or work-based acquaintances, helped to sustain migrant platform workers by offering instrumental assistance, emotional comfort and limited forms of solidarity. As shown in previous studies on platform workers (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Mendonça et al., 2023; Sun & Zhao, 2024), the acts of cultivating and drawing upon informal networks can be understood as an expression of resilience (Katz, 2004), enacted to cope with challenges of precarious work and migration in the absence of formal protections. Although informal networks were used as part of resilience

expression across both contexts, their forms and functions diverged. In Australia, co-ethnic networks often served an instrumental purpose in navigating systemic exclusion in both work and migration spheres, while in China, *laoxiang* support was primarily affective and emotionally sustaining to reinforce cultural identity rather than being materially helpful in migrants' lives. Furthermore, while the use of social networks was more individualised in the Chinese case, such networks rarely developed into collective organising in both cases.

Building upon existing research showing how migrant platform workers establish societal power through informal co-ethnic networks to cope with precarity and compensate for social exclusions (Abkhezr & Tang, 2023; Anwar & Graham, 2020; Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2025), the findings in the Australian case illustrate the dual roles of co-ethnic networks for temporary migrants on platform work. Such networks often provided them with instrumental support, such as job opportunities, accommodation and information on visa processes or employment rights, while also providing a sense of familiarity and belonging through shared language and cultural practices. Although these networks were not formally organised, migrant platform workers engaged in tactical efforts, such as forming or joining WhatsApp or WeChat groups or community forums, that created informal channels for both individual and low-level collective agency to manage precarious conditions. However, unlike what is found in previous research on platform workers' collective agency (e.g., Però & Downey, 2024; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Wells et al., 2021), these informal infrastructures did not evolve into collective organising or solidarity. This finding extends previous literature observing sparse collective agency among migrant workers (Berntsen, 2016; Zou, 2015) by demonstrating how everyday forms of collective support can emerge yet remain atomised and fragmented.

In the Australian case, this is attributed to both migrants' transitional legal status, and the perceived temporariness of platform work itself. Many workers regarded platform work as a stepping stone, rather than a long-term occupation, and thus were less inclined to engage in collective organised efforts. This supports the findings of previous studies that migrants who 'live in limbo' or are in 'liminal positions' often exercise individual agency to cope with the uncertainties in their migration processes (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014; Weidenstedt et al., 2024). Furthermore, restrictive visa rules discourage migrant workers from engaging in overt collective actions that could jeopardise visa renewal or permanent residency application (Clibborn & Wright, 2022; Wright et al., 2017). As such, while co-ethnic networks may function as critical infrastructures of resilience (Anwar & Graham, 2020), and in some previous cases developed into collective actions to resist exploitation (Alyanak et al., 2023; Hau & Savage, 2023; Però & Downey, 2024), such potential for solidarity remains conditioned by the institutional context and workers' temporal horizons.

In contrast, social networks among internal migrants in China were bifurcated and relatively more fragmented, demonstrating the distinction between kinship-based (or *laoxiang*) networks for emotional support and informal peer groups for instrumental support. Building upon previous research on the new generation of rural-to-urban migrants (Cheng, 2014; Liu et al., 2012), this thesis finds that migrant platform workers were less reliant on kinship or *laoxiang* ties for instrumental problem-solving, while using it more as emotional anchors to cope with urban exclusion because of their shared dialect, and cultural identity. While some workers accessed peer support in the work process, such as advice on delivery routes or app usage, these interactions were often shallow and transactional, shaped by the competitive and individualised nature of China's platform work business models (Sun, 2019; Yang, 2024). Although many

migrants viewed this job as a medium to long-term occupation, collective agency, including information sharing, was largely absent among migrant platform workers in the Chinese case. This can be explained by the long-standing marginalised status of rural migrants (Chan, 2009) and the individualism of platform work business models (Chang & Huang, 2023), that jointly create a fragmented environment fostering competition over collaboration. In this context, resilience was enacted through individual effort, rather than collectively empowering networks.

While both groups of migrants demonstrated socially embedded forms of resilience through their informal networks, these cross-country differences in the form, function and density of migrants' social networks can be explained by broader migration structures and policies, and workers' temporal orientations.

First, differences in the structure of international and internal migration shape the extent to which workers perceive co-ethnic or *laoxiang* networks as necessary and instrumental in responding to unfamiliar environments. Similar to international temporary migrants in other countries (e.g. Bryson & White, 2019; Potter & Hamilton, 2014), migrant workers in Australia arrived in an unfamiliar environment with limited access to institutional support and faced linguistic, legal, and cultural barriers in accessing the host labour market. In this context, migrants tended to develop stronger reliance on co-ethnic networks, which are critical infrastructures for survival, facilitating integration through both emotional support and instrumental resource sharing (Ray, 2024). In contrast, rural migrants in China had national citizenship, shared language, and some degree of familiarity with the urban context. While they remained structurally marginalised, previous research and this thesis both found that the new generation of rural-to-urban migrants has shifted away from kinship- or origin-based relationships towards establishing looser, urban-based friendships for improved economic

outcomes and urban integration (Cheng, 2014; Liu et al., 2012). Therefore, these workers reduced their reliance on cohesive *laoxiang* networks, and their social networks became more fragmented than those of international migrants in Australia.

Second, labour migration regimes and migrant workers' temporal horizons also shape how their social networks are mobilised. In Australia, migrants with upward mobilities or future-oriented aspirations, such as moving to another job or applying for permanent residency, tended to invest in instrumental co-ethnic relationships that support those goals. Their initiatives such as joining community groups, exchanging migration advice, and pooling resources reflected forward-looking strategies that extended resilience beyond sense-making survival. In the Chinese case, some migrants similarly expressed longer-term aspirations, while having limited prospects for structural mobility because of the exceptionally high threshold of getting urban *hukou* (Chan, 2010a; Li & Chen, 2024). As such, *laoxiang* networks were more commonly used for present emotional buffering, rather than long-term strategic advancement. This difference highlights how imagined futures shaped the form of agency. That is, when futures are structurally blocked or uncertain, social ties tend to be used for coping rather than transformative planning. This insight reframes resilience not as a static coping mechanism but as a temporally contingent practice, structured by what migrants imagine to be achieved in the future.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the literature on labour agency and migration studies in several ways. First, while recent scholars have increasingly connected agency to meso-level institutional factors such as migration policy and labour market rules (e.g., Katta et al., 2024; Orth, 2024), the community relations that enable workers to enact those strategies are still under-theorised (Kelly, 2012). Building upon earlier studies situated workers' agency within global production networks (Carswell & De Neve, 2013), this thesis finds that migrant platform

workers' informal social networks can play a critical but bounded role in supporting resilience in individualised and algorithmically managed platform work environments.

Second, while prior literature has recognised the role of co-ethnic social networks or *laoxiang* ties in supporting migrant workers (Li et al., 2019; Lobo & Mellander, 2020; Yue et al., 2013), by comparing migrant workers' informal networks in Australia and China, the findings extend existing insights by showing how the institutional contexts and migrants' temporal horizons condition both the composition and strategic use of such informal networks, and whether co-ethnic or *laoxiang* networks operate as practical infrastructure for everyday survival or primarily as affective anchors, highlighting that the temporality of resilience – whether goal-oriented or present-focused – is shaped by both migrants' imagined futures and the institutional conditions that make those futures more or less attainable.

Third, previous studies found that social media groups formed by migrant platform workers often scale up to formal collective action (Alyanak et al., 2023; Hau & Savage, 2023; Ray, 2024). The evidence presented here, however, shows that escalation is contingent on the interaction between labour migration regimes and workers' temporal horizons. In Australia, fear of deportation often halted mobilisation at low-level coordination despite the robust networks formed among workers. In China, intense competition among platform workers and *hukou*-based exclusion inhibited solidarities for collective action, demonstrating that institutional contexts and imagined futures jointly shaped the opportunities and acts of collective agency. In doing so, this study extends Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010)'s call to 'reconnect labour agency to the webs of wider relations' (p. 221) by showing that, in platform economies, such webs are often fragmented and constrained by regulatory conditions that limit their potential to develop into more organised forms of collective agency.

Lastly, while previous literature suggests that workers' everyday coping (i.e., resilience), given accumulated resources, may be a basis for more transformative practices (e.g., reworking and resistance) (Avagianou et al., 2025; Kiil & Knutsen, 2016), the findings in this study indicate that such transitions are conditional. Transitions occurs only when institutional structures and workers' temporal horizons align to create opportunities for transformation. Building on Katz's (2004) view that these categories interact rather than unfold sequentially, the findings presented here demonstrate that resilience is a dynamic and contextual expression of agency rather than a universal first step towards transformation.

8.3 Reworking

This section examines how migrant platform workers engage in reworking – strategies aimed at improving their conditions without directly challenging the structures that constrain them (Katz, 2004). Across both contexts, migrant platform workers adopted a variety of reworking practices that included both short-term adaptations and longer-term efforts to reposition themselves and navigate precarious work and migration lives. The empirical findings reveal three key forms of reworking observed in both countries: in-platform tactical strategies such as multi-apping and algorithmic optimisation; enacting worker mobility as a means of exiting exploitative conditions; and migration-oriented strategies involving legal repositioning to restructure their migration trajectories. While these forms of reworking were common across Australia and China, the specific practices, and temporal orientations underpinning them differed. The following sections explore how migrant platform workers attempted to improve their circumstances within structurally constrained environments, revealing the contingent and differentiated nature of reworking across different institutional contexts.

8.3.1 In-platform tactical reworking

Migrant platform workers in both Australia and China enacted day-to-day reworking strategies aimed at improving their work conditions from within the platform economy, without directly challenging platform structures. Such practices exemplify what Katz (2004) terms ‘reworking’ – efforts to recalibrate relations within existing structures in pursuit of better material outcomes. The cross-national comparison reveals similarities in the reworking strategies and highlights how different platform governance regimes and mechanisms mediate the forms and intensity of these strategies.

In both contexts, migrant platform workers engaged in similar in-platform reworking strategies, such as multi-apping, strategic scheduling and algorithmic adaptation, reflecting a navigation of platform organisation to subtly reconfigure their working conditions. Such behaviours align with existing scholarship on ‘gaming the system’ where workers exploit digital infrastructures to assert limited control over platform-imposed constraints while remaining embedded in platform work structures (Iazzolino & Varesio, 2023; Lata et al., 2023). Despite the lack of formal protections, the use of independent contracting and algorithmic management externalises risk onto workers while creating room for them to manoeuvre (Griesbach et al., 2019; Sun, 2019; Veen et al., 2020). Such similarities in reworking tactics suggest that the flexibility and constraints of platform governance operate across borders, shaping workers’ reworking strategies in ways that transcend national institutional contexts.

Despite similarities in tactical reworking across contexts, key divergences emerged in how these strategies were shaped and constrained by distinct structural conditions and governance of platform work. In Australia, food-delivery platforms adopted relatively

decentralised and flexible management models with minimal supervision, where workers operated as independent contractors and tactically optimised their work in ways that prioritise income maximisation and flexibility (Lata et al., 2023). By contrast, while similarly classifying workers as independent contractors, Chinese platforms were characterised by more hierarchical and stringent governance structures, with both crowdsourced and outsourced business models integrating algorithmic monitoring with in-person managerial control via intermediary service stations (Sun, 2019; Yang, 2024). This hybrid governance model required more tactical and internally adaptive strategies, resulting in more defensive and intricate strategies because workers sought to mitigate penalties rather than assert control.

These nuanced differences, however, should not be interpreted as variations in the strength of worker agency, but rather as reflections of how distinct architectures of platform business models channel agency into different tactical expressions. This extends Katz's (2004) insight that reworking is a form of contingent agency by showing how such strategies are shaped by the meso-level institutional structures of platform work. Moreover, while migrant workers' tactical in-platform reworking strategies demonstrate efforts to navigate and subtly recalibrate the terms of platform work, worker in both countries remained bounded by the platform systems they sought to manipulate. Building upon existing literature which suggests that acts of reworking often stabilise rather than disrupt prevailing power relations (Barratt et al., 2020; Popan, 2024), this thesis shows that, despite institutional differences in labour migration regimes, platform migrant workers' reworking tactics resulted in work intensification and thus entrenched their persistently precarious positions in both contexts.

8.3.2 Exit as reworking: switching employment sectors or platforms

A second key approach through which migrant platform workers exercise reworking is through job mobility, either moving across platforms or quitting undesirable jobs to improve their material conditions. Across both the Australian case and the Chinese case, the findings reveal striking similarities in workers' reliance on exit-oriented strategies to mitigate unfavourable conditions and regain a degree of autonomy. Following Katz's (2004) framework, these forms of 'exit' are considered as reworking as they reflect workers' efforts to reposition themselves within the labour market without challenging its structure. The cross-country comparison shows that, despite operating under different institutional constraints and temporalities, migrant platform workers in both contexts adopted similar tactics of switching platforms, or changing job sectors in search of better earnings, increased flexibility, or security. The following discussion unpacks these shared strategies while highlighting the nuanced differences in how institutional constraints and temporal orientations shape the effectiveness and outcomes of exit in each context.

Across both contexts, migrant platform workers used exit as a reworking strategy in two approaches: switching between platforms and shifting across employment sectors. First, many interviewees reported switching to alternative food-delivery platforms because of declining earnings, intensified algorithmic control or the desire for better alignment with individual priorities. While such mobility reflects migrant workers' ability to improve their conditions, it demonstrates a constrained form of reworking shaped by limited alternatives beyond the platform work sector for migrant workers, and led to only marginal improvements without disrupting the platform labour regime in which they remain embedded (Griesbach et al., 2019; Sun, 2019; Veen et al., 2020). Second, migrant workers also engaged in intersectoral mobility, moving between platform work and more traditional forms of employment. The findings indicate

that the direction of this movement was often shaped by migrants' temporal horizons. Those with short-term horizons on their stay, such as 'returners' or migrants with an uncertain outlook, entered platform work to maximise income and flexibility in a transitional phase, whereas those with long-term settlement aspirations were more likely to pursue stable, socially recognised jobs beyond platform work.

These findings emphasise that migrant workers' temporal horizons on their migration trajectories actively shaped how exit-oriented reworking practices were enacted. While previous scholarship has recognised that platform work is often perceived as transitional (Axelsson et al., 2017; Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2021; Newlands, 2024), less is known about the impacts of migrant workers' planned migration trajectories on their work decisions. This thesis extends existing research by integrating such temporal dimensions into the analysis of reworking and showing how migrants' anticipated length of stay and imagined futures – shaped by their legal status, migration trajectories and prospects for permanent residency – condition their strategic use of exit in the labour market. In both contexts, migrants' decisions to change employment sectors or seek alternative jobs were not driven solely by the unfavourable work conditions, but also by how such moves fit within their broader migration life plans. The thesis thus responds to calls for situating labour agency within its wider socio-institutional context (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010) and extends Katz's (2004) understandings of reworking by showing that it is not just an act responding to institutional structures, but also a temporal practice shaped by migrants' life trajectories.

While migrant workers enacted agency through moving across different sectors of the economy, the findings suggest that the outcomes of such strategies were frequently shaped, and ultimately constrained, by the broader institutional structures in which they were embedded. In

both Australia and China, interviewees described their efforts to exit undesirable jobs and move between food-delivery, construction or other low-wage informal jobs, demonstrating lateral movement between precarious jobs within secondary labour markets in both countries. This highlights their constrained mobility shaped by temporary migrants' restrictive work rights, limited skill recognition and bargaining power in the Australian guest-worker regime (Wright & Clibborn, 2020) and the *hukou*-based barriers to upward mobility in China (Chan, 2009). Moreover, within China's platform economy itself, the shift between different work modes – *zhongbao* (crowdsourced delivery) and *zhuansong* (outsourced delivery) – illustrates how free choices provided by platforms may in fact act as a stabilising mechanism that deterred real exit from the platforms and kept them within the structures, leading to workers describing being 'trapped in the platform' (Zhou, 2024). These findings build on studies of constrained exit (Zampoukos et al., 2018) by extending it to platform work and highlighting that despite different institutional structures, reworking through exit reproduces rather than escapes from existing power structures. In doing so, this study advances Katz's (2004) concept of reworking as contingent agency by demonstrating how labour migration regimes, digital platform organisation and labour market segmentation interact to limit the transformative potential of exit as a reworking strategy to improve precarious conditions.

8.3.3 Migration-oriented reworking: navigating migrant status

A third dimension of reworking concerns how migrant platform workers in both cases sought to improve their precarious migration lives and reshape their legal or institutional positioning through migration-oriented strategies under restrictive labour migration regimes. Across both cases, the findings reveal a shared pattern in acts of reworking to navigate migration rules in

order to prolong their stay, improve their prospects for long-term or permanent residency, or gain access to full citizenship rights within the boundaries of existing migration rules. While these acts may not have directly challenged their structural marginalisation, migrant workers attempted to manoeuvre within existing structural constraints and comply with regulatory frameworks, exemplifying the reworking practices (Katz, 2004). This section comparatively analyses how the forms and logics of these reworking practices differed in Australia and China, and how they were variably shaped by the institutional design of labour migration regimes, as well as migrants' temporal horizons.

In the Australian case, migrants primarily engaged with formal migration pathways and legal mechanisms, such as skilled migration programs, to transform precarious temporary status into more secure, longer-term stay or permanent residency. Throughout this process, migrant workers demonstrated *procedural* reworking, through which they tactically switched between study and work visa streams, leveraged family circumstances, or aligned their educational choices with the migration points-based system, to prolong their legal residence and preserve the possibility of eventual permanent residency or citizenship. Rather than directly transitioning to permanent status in one step, migrants actively worked the incremental process itself through tactical transitions between different visa streams to maintain their continuous legality, and ability to stay, in the host country.

This reworking strategy operated through what can be conceptualised as *staggered* temporality. Many migrant workers navigated their stay through a sequence of short-term visas, such as student, graduate, working holiday maker or dependent visas, often valid for 2 to 4 years. This strategy, however, was inherently fragile because changing policy landscapes and rising thresholds for permanent residency created a 'staggered' migration process for many migrants,

who often experienced ‘long-term temporariness’ (Robertson, 2019; Wright & Clibborn, 2020). Migrant workers thus continually recalibrated their reworking strategies to balance immediate livelihood needs with uncertain prospects for longer-term settlement, showing how their agency remained contingent on the structural characteristics of the labour migration regimes.

By contrast, in the Chinese case, rural-to-urban migrant workers engaged in a form of what this study terms *performative* reworking. Although they were legally permitted to live and work indefinitely in cities, their second-class status under the exclusionary *hukou* system meant that their reworking acts often focused on obtaining local urban *hukou* to access full citizenship rights and overcome structural marginalisation. The findings show that to do so, some migrants engaged with the points-based *hukou* system by accumulating credentials through such as property purchases, social security payments or community services participation. Previous studies have shown that many rural migrants pursue *hukou* conversion despite recognising the process is fraught with uncertainty (Li & Chen, 2024; Wu, 2013), which the data in this study also reflects. From an agency perspective, these acts of reworking can be seen as somewhat *performative* in that they involved in procedural compliance and signal eligibility for local *hukou* even when migrants realised that the actual conversion was unlikely. Distinctive from resilience, this form of reworking was neither passive nor fully strategic; rather, it resembled buying a lottery ticket, which technically preserved a chance for improvement, yet was characterised by the fatalism of likely failure. The institutional design of the *hukou* regime, particularly the decentralised, quota-based and discretionary nature of the points-based system, further reinforces this uncertainty (Dang et al., 2019; Li & Chen, 2024). This contrasts with the Australian case, where similarly low chances of success often prompted acts of rule-bending or strategic resistance, which is further unpacked in the next section. In China, by contrast, in the face of

improbable outcomes, workers often continued to comply, illustrating how structural constraints shaped not only what forms of agency are possible, but also what agency practices were deemed meaningful.

This performative reworking strategy among rural migrants in this study operated through a *deferred* temporality. Their efforts to obtain local *hukou* often stretched over years or even generations because points-based *hukou* conversion required long-term commitment such as stable employment, continuous tax payments, long-term social insurance or housing ownership over years (Lao et al., 2022). This inherently prolonged process, when combined with the opaque and elevated *hukou* thresholds in mega-cities like Guangzhou (Li & Chen, 2024; Quheng & Gustafsson, 2014), keeps many rural migrants in a state of long-term marginalisation with their full citizenship indefinitely postponed.

While the forms and temporalities of migration-oriented reworking differed across Australia and China, they both ultimately reinforced the institutional structures that continued to shape migrants' marginalised status. In Australia, procedural reworking through navigating visa chains supplied a steady stream of flexible, compliant workers who helped sustain the guest-worker regime (Wright & Clibborn, 2020). In China, performative reworking practices demonstrate migrants' compliance with *hukou* policy, through which they invested time and social capital into cities' development while not disrupting the rural-urban stratification among workers.

This thesis advances scholarship on labour agency and platform work by extending the application of Katz's (2004) framework (e.g., Barratt et al., 2020; Popan, 2024; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020) to the intersection of the workplace and the broader migration process, showing how reworking can be enacted in navigating labour migration regimes to improve migrants'

precarious conditions. While prior studies have examined migrants' navigation of legal pathways (Khoo et al., 2008; Li & Chen, 2024; Robertson, 2014), few have explicitly conceptualised these acts as forms of *reworking* agency. This thesis expands the conceptual reach of Katz's (2004) framework by interpreting migrants' efforts to tactically navigate visa regimes or *hukou* systems not merely as compliance or instrumental planning, but as migration-oriented reworking strategies shaped by structural constraints.

While previous platform work studies have largely applied Katz's (2004) concept of reworking to the workplace, emphasising how tactical recalibration often stabilises platform or organisational structures (e.g., Avagianou et al., 2025; Barratt et al., 2020; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020), this thesis extends the understanding of reworking by showing that migration-oriented reworking, such as strategic visa transitions or symbolic compliance with *hukou* conversion, similarly reinforces the institutional structures of labour migration regimes. In doing so, the thesis demonstrates that the structure-reinforcing nature of reworking holds not only within workplaces, but also across broader migration systems.

Lastly, by undertaking a comparative analysis, the thesis reveals how distinct labour migration regimes shape the forms and meanings of reworking practices differently across national contexts, yet, unexpectedly, these different practices produce similar outcomes in terms of their precarious positions despite their efforts to improve the marginalised conditions. This thesis contributes to labour agency conceptualisation by introducing the concepts of *procedural reworking* and *performative reworking* to capture how migrant workers navigate distinct labour migration regimes in Australia and China respectively, as defined in Table 8.3. Procedural reworking refers to the tactical sequencing of short-term visas (e.g., study-work-family transitions) to extend legal stay and preserve long-term possibilities, underpinned by a staggered

temporality. Performative reworking, by contrast, refers to migrants’ symbolic compliance with opaque and discretionary *hukou* conversion systems, shaped by a deferred temporality. These new conceptual categories advance a more nuanced understanding of Katz’s (2004) framework of reworking in migration regimes and illustrate how temporality and institutional structure interact to shape migrants’ strategic agency practices.

Table 8.3: Comparisons between forms of migration-related reworking among migrant platform workers

Reworking Type	Definition
Procedural reworking	Tactical navigation of formal migration pathways and visa rules to extend legal stay and preserve future settlement options within restrictive migration regimes. It often involves sequencing short-term temporary visas to maintain continuous legality. It is underpinned by a <i>staggered</i> temporal logic, where workers make incremental progressions due to changing migration policies and uncertainties, often resulting in long-term temporariness.
Performative reworking	Symbolic compliance with the points-based hukou system to signal eligibility for full urban citizenship rights, even when success is highly improbable. It involves accumulating credentials to preserve the chance. It is underpinned by a <i>deferred</i> temporality, where migrants’ efforts span years or generations, requiring sustained investments in time and resources. Hukou conversion is continuously postponed, leaving workers in prolonged marginalisation despite ongoing compliance.

8.4 Resistance

Building on the preceding discussion of resilience and reworking, this section examines *resistance* as the third category of migrant workers’ agency within the platform economy. While Katz (2004) originally defined resistance as acts underpinned by oppositional consciousness that confront and redress oppressive social relations, this study adopts a spectrum-based understanding of resistance that includes both overt and covert practices. Specifically, it

interprets misbehaviour, non-compliance, and tactical disruption, even when individually enacted and lacking explicit political agendas, as forms of resistance that challenge exploitative platform governance and labour migration regimes. Across both Australia and China, the findings reveal a common pattern of everyday work-related resistance, where migrant platform workers tactically bent or evaded algorithmic controls to regain limited autonomy over their work. However, other forms of resistance involving more intentional strategies that stretched or subverted labour migration rules were observed only in the Australian case and were notably absent in the Chinese case. This section explores how, under algorithmic management, everyday covert tactics emerged as a response to digital control and fragmented work arrangements on platform work in both cases. It then considers how context-specific resistance extended beyond the workplace into the domain of migration in Australia where legal migration pathways could be tactically manipulated. In doing so, this section highlights how structural conditions, including labour migration regimes, regulatory framework, and migrants' temporal horizons, shaped the acts of resistance differently in different national contexts.

8.4.1 Everyday work-related resistance

Migrant platform workers in both Australia and China engaged in subtle everyday acts to navigate the constraints of platform organisation and algorithmic management. Drawing on Katz's (2004) framework, these practices, such as manipulating app settings and using hidden workarounds in managing orders, can be understood as resistance because they bend or subvert platform rules, disrupt digital surveillance, and reassert workers' control over how, when and where they work. However, across both cases, a common feature is the absence of sustained collective resistance. The resistance tactics of migrant platform workers were primarily small-

scale, covert and individualised, rarely escalating into large-scale, collective, organised actions (e.g., protest, strikes, union campaigns). One explanation lies in the structural features of platform work itself. Echoing previous studies on platform workers' resistance (Liu & Friedman, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), the findings demonstrate that the fragmented, atomised, high turnover nature of food-delivery work systematically marginalised platform workers and discouraged sustained coordination or solidarity formation among them. In both countries, platform workers are classified as either independent contractors or outsourced workers, aligning with studies that emphasise how independent contracting arrangements weaken workers' incentives for collective mobilisation (Umney et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2022).

However, the absence of collective resistance cannot be explained by the platform work structure alone. While the platform work's individualised and atomised nature has, to a large extent, inhibited large-scale acts of collective resistance, a growing body of literature on platform work has documented collective mobilisation among platform workers across different national contexts, where they engaged in strikes, union campaigns, or grassroots protests to contest unfair working conditions (Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2024; López et al., 2025; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Umney et al., 2024). These studies, however, often treat workers' migrant status as a background demographic feature rather than as an analytical factor shaping their resistance. Therefore, less is known about how migrants' precarious legal or residency status constrains their access to collective organisation and discourages open confrontation among platform workers under the constraints of labour migration regimes.

Unlike cases in Europe or North America where grassroots or formal unions have enabled platform workers' large-scale collective resistance practices (e.g., Hau & Savage, 2023; Mendonça & Kougiannou, 2024; López et al., 2025; Umney et al., 2024), none of the

interviewees in this study reported participating in formal collective mobilisation activities, despite the work-related grievances in both the Australian and Chinese cases. Instead, acts of resistance remained fragmented, covert and individualised. This highlights how, in the absence of institutional structures that enable worker representation and that support collective organisation, resistance is more likely to manifest as covert, individualised resistance without directly confronting power structures, particularly among migrant workers. In China, although labour protests have periodically emerged since the early 2000s, collective rights to organise, strike, and bargain are neither constitutionally protected nor institutionally supported (Chan, 2014; Chang & Cooke, 2015). That is, while not explicitly illegal, the rights to strike and freedom of association are neither legally protected nor clearly regulated. Trade unions are often perceived as extensions of the state or management due to their dependent nature as stipulated by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the state, and that therefore fail to represent workers' interests in collective dispute actions (Chang & Cooke, 2015; Zhu, 2011). These institutional constraints are particularly acute for rural migrant workers, who are often engaged in precarious or informal employment relationships and are economically dependent on these relationships. For these workers, participation in collective resistance involves significant risks of job loss and even political reprisal, making overt collective action less viable for them.

In the Australian case, despite formal labour rights enshrined in employment law, structural restrictions embedded in the labour migration regime constrain temporary migrants' participation in acts of collective resistance. International temporary migrants, such as those on student, working holiday, or bridging visas, are disproportionately concentrated in jobs with weak enforcement of labour standards and low union representation (Wright & Clibborn, 2020). Meanwhile, as workers who are often engaged in precarious employment, the uncertainty of visa

renewals and the threat of dismissal or platform account deactivation discourages them from exercising overt confrontation against employers, which could jeopardise their employment or immigration status (Wright et al., 2022; Wright and Clibborn, 2019; Van Den Broek et al., 2021).

In both cases, the limited expressions of collective resistance were not simply a reflection of the isolating nature of platform work, but rather a consequence of the structural constraints imposed by broader labour migration and political regimes in which migrant workers are embedded. Legal precarity, weak or distrusted union representation, and the economic and legal risks associated with open confrontation make migrant platform workers' overt collective mobilisation highly constrained. As a result, what might resemble coordinated practices, such as WeChat-based information sharing, remained atomised and informal, more aligned with resilience or reworking than overt resistance. Even when overt acts occurred, such as filing a formal complaint against a local service station in the Chinese case, these acts ended with workers' exit, rather than evolving into collective organising, highlighting the importance of institutional support for collective resistance. By doing so, the thesis extends Katz's (2004) framework by incorporating a migration-centred perspective, showing how legal insecurity and exclusion from institutional support redirect migrant workers' oppositional acts towards covert, individualised, and defiant forms of resistance.

This thesis further contributes to current debates on the paradoxical effects of individualised resistance in the platform economy by extending the arguments advanced by Barratt et al. (2020) and Cameron (2024), who argued that individualised acts of resistance may stabilise rather than disrupt the power structures and business models of platform work. While prior studies primarily foreground the labour process dynamics and algorithmic control, this

thesis advances a comparative institutional lens by showing how labour migration regimes – through visa restrictions, legal precarity, and limited access to voice mechanisms – structurally channel migrant workers into individualised acts of everyday resistance. In doing so, the thesis extends these debates by highlighting the need to integrate institutionalist perspectives into labour agency research, and to conceptualise resistance as institutionally conditioned behaviour that reinforces the viability of the platform business model.

8.4.2 Migration-related resistance: exploiting the loopholes

Whereas migrant platform workers' everyday resistance is often enacted towards platform management and operational mechanisms, this section extends the analysis of agency by focusing on how migrant workers in these two countries evaded, bent or broke migration rules that govern their legal rights to stay, work, or access entitlements in the host society (i.e., migration-related resistance). Drawing on Katz's (2004) framework and recent extensions that foreground covert, context-sensitive resistance (e.g., Anwar & Graham, 2020; Bonhomme et al., 2025), these practices are conceptualised as resistance because they confront exclusionary labour migration frameworks and reclaim some control over mobility and life trajectories as migrants. While often informal and individually enacted, such acts of defiance and non-compliance reveal migrant workers' attempts to resist migration regulations, disrupt the functionality of restrictive labour migration regimes, and therefore challenge their structural marginalisation. This section focuses on the emergence of such resistance in the Australian case, and its notable absence in the Chinese case, to demonstrate how different labour migration regimes enable or constrain this form of agency.

In the Australian case, migrant platform workers were found to engage in a range of resistance practices to extend or stretch their rights to stay and work, often in ways that strategically circumvented formal migration rules. These include exceeding legal work hour limit under student visa regulations, taking up jobs while on tourist visas without authorisation, and in more extreme instances, submitting bogus protection visa claims – usually reserved for genuine refugees – to gain temporary lawful residence during the processing period and extend their stay in Australia. These acts of resistance were enabled by three intersecting features of Australia’s labour migration regime. First, limited coordination and inconsistent enforcement across key institutions, including immigration authorities, tax offices and platform organisations, reduced the likelihood of detection, lowering the perceived risks associated with breaching visa rules. Second, the labour migration system consisted of a range of temporary visa categories, many of which (e.g., student, working holiday makers) provided few or no accessible pathways to permanent residency (Wright & Clibborn, 2020). This institutionalised temporariness created a precarious environment that motivated migrants to find ways to ‘game’ the system in order to prolong their legal stay. Third, protracted visa processing timelines, such as for protection visas, created administrative loopholes that some migrants tactically exploited to extend their stay in Australia while awaiting decisions (Kalra, 2025). These features not only enabled regulatory non-compliance but also facilitated migrant workers’ resistance against the institutional precarity imposed by migration rules.

By contrast, no comparable pattern of migration-related resistance was observed among food-delivery platform workers interviewed in China. While previous studies have reported some illegal practices such as forging vocational or educational certificates, fabricating social insurance records or falsifying employment histories through fake contracts to meet the *hukou*

eligibility (He, 2011; Jiang, 2013), these practices were not reported by participants in this study. One key explanation lies in the perceived risk and uncertainty associated with navigating the *hukou* system. The high eligibility criteria and discretionary, locally enforced *hukou* conversion rules make it difficult for migrants to clearly assess the boundaries of compliance (Dang et al., 2019; Li & Chen, 2024). This institutional ambiguity was further compounded by China's relatively high level of local surveillance, particularly over floating population movements, which increased the likelihood of detection and punishment. In this context, rule-bending was less viable for rural migrants. It is also possible that participants who engaged in such practices may have been unwilling to disclose them due to these perceived legal and personal risks. The *hukou* reforms since 2014 have provided rural migrants with some substitute pathways through which they can access partial welfare entitlements such as access to public schools and public rental housing (Chan, 2019; Chen et al., 2024), but the extent to which these concessions have reduced the incentives of migrants to engage in overt rule-breaking remains unclear. Future research is needed to disentangle whether the presence of alternative pathways, the deterrent effect of state surveillance, or a combination of both, most strongly constrains acts of migration-related resistance in China.

The distinct approaches to resisting migration-related restrictions adopted by migrant platform workers in Australia and China were shaped by different labour migration systems and the temporality of migrants' trajectories. In Australia, the migration system in place when the research was conducted offered multiple, clearly defined temporary visa streams that could be layered, switched or combined. Although these pathways commonly did not lead to permanency for food-delivery platform workers, the rule-based and procedural nature, along with fragmented enforcement, created opportunities for tactical workarounds. By contrast, the lack of procedural

transparency of the *hukou* system and the high risk of detection disincentivised rule-bending practices among precarious rural-to-urban migrant workers in China. Furthermore, in Australia, migrants with short-term horizons, such as international students or working holiday makers, often viewed their stay as temporary and transactional and therefore engaged in bolder rule-bending acts without fear of long-term repercussions. In China, however, the deferred nature of the settlement process via *hukou* conversion channelled migrants into everyday endurance or incremental reworking on their eligibility rather than direct legal confrontation with *hukou* policies. In sum, the contrasting patterns reveal how labour migration regimes and temporal structures jointly shaped migrants' acts of resistance – where short-term, rule-based migration systems enable acts of circumvention, while prolonged legal ambiguity and constrained temporality generate compliance.

Taken together, these findings contribute to literature on labour agency by extending the conceptual scope of *resistance* beyond the sphere of platform organisation, and identifying rule-bending acts vis-à-vis migration rules, such as visa misuse and strategic non-compliance, as tactical resistance. While existing studies on worker agency have extensively documented platform workers' acts of resistance to algorithmic control and exploitative labour conditions (e.g., Anwar & Graham, 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), they have largely overlooked how migrant platform workers respond to the migration-related constraints that structure their ability to live and work in host societies. This study foregrounds the role of labour migration regimes as a key institutional factor shaping the form and viability of resistance, thereby shifting the analytical lens from platform-specific dynamics to the broader structural environment that conditions migrant workers' agency. In doing so, it advances a migration-centred perspective on resistance that complements and extends Katz's (2004) conceptualisation of labour agency.

Building upon recent work by Sun et al., (2025) that identified how migrant workers on ‘emerging’ food-delivery platforms in Australia (e.g., Hungry Panda, EASI) exhibited non-compliance behaviours in bending and/or breaking visa restrictions, this study broadens this conceptual and empirical terrain. By showing that similar practices are used by migrant workers across a wider range of food-delivery platforms in Australia, this study contributes to the literature by expanding the empirical scope of non-compliance behaviours enacted by migrant workers, highlighting that these acts are not platform-specific workarounds confined to niche or ethnic-based platforms, but instead are common resistance tactics shaped by the interaction between platform capitalism and restrictive labour migration regimes.

Lastly, this study contributes comparative analytical insights by showing that similar conditions of precarity and marginalisation among migrant platform workers do not automatically result in similar expressions of resistance. Instead, the forms and viability of resistance are shaped by the interaction between labour migration regimes and migrants’ temporal orientations. In Australia, a rule-based multi-layered but fragmented migration system enabled short-term, opportunistic resistance acts in bending and breaking rules, whereas in China, an opaque and discretionary *hukou* regime, along with deferred temporal uncertainty, channelled migrant workers into symbolic compliance or performative reworking rather than overt rule-bending. These findings underscore the importance of jointly analysing institutional and temporal structures to understand the differentiated expressions of migrant resistance across national contexts.

8.5 Summary

This chapter has utilised a comparative analysis to demonstrate that labour migration regimes and temporal horizons interact to shape migrant platform workers' expressions of agency. This analysis has highlighted that, despite operating under fundamentally different labour migration regimes, there are striking similarities in the constraints faced by migrant platform workers in Australia and China and in the broad agency expressions they adopted to manage them, while also revealing contextual nuances in how these agency practices were enacted. Drawing on Katz's (2004) framework of resilience, reworking and resistance, the discussion reveals that migrant platform workers engage in diverse strategies to navigate the precarity of platform work and migration life. Across both cases, agency expressions were shaped by the interaction of labour migration regimes and temporal horizons.

In analysing resilience practices, the chapter has revealed that temporal horizons interact with labour migration regimes to shape the affective and social infrastructure of endurance of precarity. Across both contexts, migrant platform workers demonstrated emotional coping strategies and drew on social networks as shared forms of resilience, highlighting common ways of sustaining themselves under precarious conditions. In Australia, resilience was often transitional and goal-oriented, grounded in instrumental meaning-making and forward-looking horizons of migration trajectories and supported by co-ethnic networks. In China, by contrast, emotional resilience was more prolonged and normalised, shaped by the constrained temporality imposed by the *hukou* system and the increasingly fragmented *laoxiang* ties.

The chapter has also examined shared reworking patterns in terms of three dimensions across contexts, namely tactical adjustments within platform work, exit strategy, and migration-oriented manoeuvres. While some strategies reflect shared flexibility of platform work across

borders, the discussion has highlighted how workers' navigation of migration system was differentially structured by visa regimes in Australia and the *hukou*-based system in China. In both cases, despite these distinct pathways in different systems, reworking practices often led to similar outcomes as the efforts ultimately reinforced rather than transformed structural constraints.

The analysis of acts of resistance, the analysis revealed that they are predominantly covert and individualised in both contexts, shaped by platform governance as well as the workers' legal and temporal status. Everyday work-related resistance, such as bending algorithmic controls or managing orders strategically, emerged as a shared tactic among workers across the two countries. However, more varied and opportunistic forms of migration-related resistance has evident only in the Australian case, while Chinese case showed a notable absence of such behaviour, highlighting how institutional opacity and deferred temporality dampened resistance expressions.

By placing labour migration regimes at the centre of analysis rather than treating them as merely institutional contexts, this study advances a migration-centred perspective of labour agency. While migrant workers in this comparative study operated within different labour migration regimes, platform governance and migrants' precarious status created similar restrictions that shaped workers' constrained agency, as well as similar strategies of coping, recalibrating, and confronting across contexts. Meanwhile, the meanings, temporal logics and risk of these expressions differed, shaped by each country's labour migration regime and workers' temporal horizons. This insight contributes a novel comparative lens to labour agency scholarship and highlights the value of integrating regulatory, temporal, and migratory dimensions into analyses of platform work and labour agency.

The comparative analysis in this chapter provides the analytical foundations for answering the thesis's central research question by showing that, under distinct labour migration regimes, both similarities and nuanced differences emerge in how migrant platform workers express agency. Building on the discussions presented here, the concluding chapter brings these insights together to offer a comprehensive response to the research question. It also synthesises the key contributions of the study, acknowledges its limitations, and outlines implications for future research.

CHAPTER 9 Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This thesis was motivated by an empirical paradox that despite significant institutional differences in the two national contexts – Australia’s visa-based international migration regime and China’s *hukou*-based internal migration regime – both channel migrants into structurally marginal positions in the urban labour market where they are overrepresented in precarious platform work and with constrained agency. This raises the puzzles identified in Chapter 1. These relate, first, to how such different migration governance systems produce a shared outcome of precariousness and shared pattern labour agency and, second, to how migrant platform workers navigate, adapt to or challenge their conditions within the different institutional contexts given the common experience of structural constraints. The puzzles helped set out the central question presented in Chapter 1: *How do labour migration regimes shape the agency expressions of migrant platform workers?* Labour migration regimes refer to the system of migration policies, visa or registration rules, and employment regulations that govern migrants’ legal status, rights at work, and prospects for permanent residency or citizenship. Theoretically drawing upon Katz’s (2004) framework of resilience, reworking, and resistance, this thesis examined and analysed the forms, viability, and meanings of workers’ agency in the food-delivery platform sector across two countries, Australia and China. To address the research question, the thesis used a qualitative comparative case study approach with a most-different systems design, focusing on international migrants in Australia and internal rural-to-urban migrants in Guangzhou, China. A combined 60 in-depth interviews with migrant workers and documentary analysis were used to analyse patterns in migrant platform workers’ agency expressions across contrasting labour migration regimes.

In addressing the research question, this thesis finds that labour migration regimes are not merely a contextual backdrop to migrant workers' experiences and agency expressions in the platform economy; they are central structural forces that actively shape the scope, form and substance of worker agency. Existing scholarship generally considers international and internal migration regimes as fundamentally distinct systems, operating through different institutional logics, with the former regulating cross-border entry and stay and the latter managing internal population movement and access to citizenship rights (Hugo, 2016). Based on these differences, one would expect divergent outcomes for migrant workers under these regimes. However, this thesis reveals some unexpected similarities. Despite the institutional contrasts between Australia's visa-based migration regime and China's *hukou*-based system, both regimes channel migrant platform workers into structurally marginalised labour market positions and result in similar patterns of constrained agency, particularly in the limited expressions of collective agency and the normalisation of tactical compliance. This convergence is explained by the structural effects of exclusionary labour migration regimes operating through different institutional logics.

At the same time, however, this thesis demonstrates that there are nuanced differences in how migrant platform workers navigate and respond to structural constraints when examined through the categorisation of resilience, reworking and resistance. These differences are shaped by the interaction between labour migration regimes and migrants' temporal horizons. More specifically, labour migration regimes shape migrant platform workers' legal status, working rights and restrictions, employment protections, access to representation, the pathways to permanent residency in Australia and *de jure* urban residency in China, as well as their position in the labour market. These institutional arrangements influence not only the opportunities and constraints within which agency is exercised but also migrants' temporal horizons, including

how long they anticipate staying, their settlement aspirations, and the types of jobs they are willing to undertake. Moreover, the temporality embedded in the labour migration regimes, such as visa durations, processing timelines or the protracted, quota-based *hukou* conversion process, further conditions how migrants comply with, navigate, or resist migration rules, ultimately shaping the strategies they employ to endure, adapt or improve their conditions.

This thesis reveals that the agency expressions of migrant platform workers are inseparable from the labour migration regimes that govern their rights, mobility and prospects for long-term permanency. By revealing how these regimes interact with workers' temporal horizons to produce both similar patterns, such as the predominance of individualised and covert agency, and different practices of resilience, reworking and resistance, the analysis resolves the central puzzle of how structurally different labour migration systems can generate similar patterns of precariousness among platform workers. Meanwhile, it shows that the institutional design of labour migration regimes shapes not only the opportunities available to migrant platform workers but also the meanings and perceived value of acting within or against structural constraints. The following sections synthesise how these findings contribute to scholarship, outline the study's limitations, and suggest directions for future research.

9.2 Contribution of the thesis

This thesis offers a multifaceted contribution to scholarship on migrant labour, platform work, and labour agency, advancing both conceptual and empirical understandings. This section presents a consolidated synthesis of contributions structured around six interrelated themes that have emerged from the preceding discussion. These include: (1) methodological innovation in comparing international versus internal migration across contexts; (2) the temporal and

institutional structuring of agency; (3) the migration-centred conceptual expansion of labour agency frameworks; (4) the contextualisation of agency of migrant platform workers; (5) empirical innovations in categorising resilience, reworking and resistance; and (6) the structure reinforcing effects of agency practices.

First, this thesis makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating the analytical value of comparing migrant platform workers' agency across international and internal migration regimes. While most comparative studies across national contexts have focused on institutional differences between varieties of capitalism (e.g., liberal vs. coordinated market economies) or Global North vs. Global South contexts (Arnholtz & Wright, 2023; Ruhs, 2018; Schneider, 2021), this thesis adopts a most-different systems design to examine two countries (i.e., Australia and China) whose migration regimes are widely regarded as fundamentally distinct and are rarely studied comparatively. By exploring both similar outcomes in workers' precarity and broader agency expressions, and the nuanced differences in workers' meaning and temporal horizons underpinning those practices, the thesis challenges the assumptions about the analytical separation of international and internal migration and provides new insights into how different labour migration regimes interact with platform governance to shape workers' responses. This comparative approach, therefore, contributes to both migration studies and platform work studies scholarship by demonstrating the potential for cross-context analyses of the drivers of differences and similarities under platform capitalism.

Second, a central contribution of this study lies in its conceptual advancement of Katz's (2004) agency framework and broader labour agency literature by incorporating institutional and temporal dimensions. It finds that migrant platform workers' expressions of agency, whether resilience, reworking, or resistance, are shaped by the interaction between labour migration

regimes and workers' temporal horizons. Across both countries, rather than viewing temporalities as background conditions of migration rules, or the labour processes (e.g., Chen & Sun, 2020; Robertson, 2014; Triandafyllidou, 2022), the study foregrounds how migrant workers' perceptions of time, such as short or long-term, staggered, deferred, or uncertain temporal horizons, interact with visa rules, *hukou*-based exclusions, and access to formal protections to shape their agentic decisions. These insights extend literature (e.g., Griffiths, 2013; Maury, 2022) that links temporality to migration and precarity by showing that temporalities in migration do not only lead to vulnerability but also shape forms of agency that migrant workers enact.

Third, building on Katz's (2004) framework, this study highlights the merits of using this framework in interrogating the intersection of the workplace and labour migration regimes, offering a migration-centred conceptual expansion of labour agency. While existing applications of this framework have focused primarily on workplace or labour process dynamics (e.g., Anwar & Graham, 2020; Barratt et al., 2020; Deng & Galliers, 2024), this study extends these applications beyond the workplace and demonstrates how acts of reworking and resistance also manifest in migrants' interactions with broader labour migration structures, such as visa restrictions and points-based *hukou* systems, to improve or radically change their precarious conditions. In doing so, the thesis advances the existing scholarship on platform labour agency, which views workers' migrant status as a contextual variable, by placing labour migration regimes at the centre of analysis and showing how the institutional structures shape workers' agency. By embedding agency within labour migration regimes, this research broadens the applicability of Katz's (2004) agency typology and strengthens its integration into migration scholarship.

Fourth, this thesis deepens contextual understandings of labour agency by embedding it within migrants' lived experiences, identities, social relations and migration trajectories. Responding to calls for a more contextualised and relational analysis of agency (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Kelly, 2012), this thesis foregrounds how emotional responses, co-ethnic networks and personal migration trajectories mediate how workers perceive and enact their agency practices. These findings contribute to emerging scholarship that seeks to understand agency as socially situated and relational, shaped by broader sociopolitical environments.

Fifth, the thesis provides original conceptual tools that extend the understanding of agency within constrained migration contexts. In resilience, it introduces a distinction between *transitional* and *instrumental* resilience of temporary migrant workers in Australia and *normalised* and *prolonged* resilience exhibited by rural migrant workers in China. In reworking, it develops the concepts of *procedural* reworking and *performative* reworking, each underpinned by distinct temporal logics of *staggered* and *deferred* process of permanent settlement. These typologies offer conceptual nuances in capturing the different meanings and mechanisms of seemingly similar forms of agency that are shaped by differentiated institutional and temporal contexts.

Finally, the thesis challenges the assumption that acts of resistance necessarily improve or disrupt existing power structures. It shows that acts of resistance, particularly those enacted through misbehaviour, defiance, or tactical non-compliance, do not necessarily subvert the systems they confront. Instead, these practices such as gaming platform algorithms, manipulating visa rules or selectively complying with migration rules often allow migrants to temporarily bypass constraints without fundamentally altering the structures, which may thus paradoxically stabilise and reproduce the regimes they navigate and reinforce existing structural power

relations. While prior research has highlighted how workers' workaround strategies may ultimately reinforce platform logic (e.g., Barratt et al., 2020; Cameron, 2024), this study makes a contribution by situating such practices explicitly within an expanded understanding of resistance. It extends Katz's (2004) framework by suggesting that covert and tactical resistance through defiance, though oppositional in intent, may nonetheless have non-transformative or even reproductive effects, reinforcing the regimes they aim to subvert, especially when enacted without collective organisation or long-term transformative intent. By showing that this stabilising effect applies to both workplace and migration-oriented forms of resistance, this study indicates the need for a reconceptualisation of labour agency as potentially reproductive of structural conditions, especially when it is shaped by restrictive labour migration regimes and constrained temporal horizons.

9.3 Limitations and future research

This thesis has several limitations related to the scope of the present study, and potential avenues for future research that can build upon it.

First, the comparative findings are conditioned by the geographical, institutional, regulatory and socio-political features of the two selected cases, namely international migrants in Sydney, Australia and internal rural-to-urban migrants in Guangzhou, China. The distinctiveness of these labour migration regimes, particularly the visa-based system in Australia and the *hukou*-based system in China, may limit the applicability of findings to other national contexts and labour migrant cohorts, especially where labour migration regimes follow different logics (e.g., intra-European regimes, Kafala regimes and constrained regimes) (Boucher & Gest, 2018). In addition, while Guangzhou serves as a representative Tier 1 city in China with a highly

restrictive *hukou* system, internal variations exist across Chinese cities in how *hukou* policies are implemented and enforced. Migrant workers in other Tier 1 cities (e.g., Shanghai, Beijing), smaller cities or different administrative contexts may encounter different institutional dynamics and forms of agency. Nevertheless, this qualitative study does not aim to be generalisable to all migrant workers, food-delivery workers, or all platform workers. It seeks to provide an in-depth comparative analysis of a broadly representative sample of migrant food-delivery workers' agency expressions in two different countries to demonstrate how their acts are shaped by the labour migration regimes and temporalities, and how their agency expressions manifest differently in these contexts. While the thesis offers conceptual insights that may travel across contexts, future research could extend the comparative lens to other labour migration regimes to explore how different configurations of legal status, temporality and institutional structures shape migrant workers' agency in similar or different ways.

Second, the study may have a self-selection bias, as the sample primarily comprises individuals who were engaged in food-delivery work at the time of the interviews. Although some participants reflected on their past employment and their decisions to leave platform work, the overall sample is weighted towards workers who have remained in the sector. As such, the discussion of 'exit-based reworking strategies' is mainly concerned with how migrant workers used reworking practices by moving from other employment to platform work rather than exit from platform work. Future research could build on this study and adopt a longitudinal or retrospective approach to trace the longer-term employment trajectories of migrant workers, particularly those who have left platform work and investigate whether such exits alter conditions.

Third, while the absence of collective action in this study reflects broader empirical patterns in the two institutional contexts, the sample does not include workers who were actively involved in collective actions or more direct forms of resistance such as strikes, protests or formally organised activities via unions. This limits the analysis of resistance to more individualised and covert forms. Given the emerging scholarship on digital collectivism and platform worker organising (Alyanak et al., 2023; Hau & Savage, 2023; Lei, 2021; Morales-Muñoz & Roca, 2022), future studies could focus more specifically on migrant platform workers engaged in collective resistance, and examine the role of migrant status, organisational conditions and institutional supports that enable or constrain such efforts.

Fourth, the thesis captures a temporally bounded snapshot of platform work and labour migration regimes. Both countries have undergone policy changes during and after the fieldwork period, including shifts in visa rules, platform regulations and legal classifications of platform workers. As both regulatory and technological environments remain in flux in Australia and China, the conditions structuring migrant workers' agency may shift over time. While this thesis provides an analysis of a particular period, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to better understand how migrant platform workers' agency evolves in response to regulatory changes, and changing institutional and employment conditions.

Lastly, while the use of Katz's (2004) framework has enabled a structured exploration of agency through the lenses of resilience, reworking, and resistance, it also imposes certain theoretical boundaries. Specifically, by categorising practices into predefined types, the study may obscure more fluid, hybrid or culturally specific forms of agency that do not fit within these categories. Future studies could investigate labour agency through alternative conceptual models

or adopt more inductive approaches to capture under-theorised or emergent forms of agency among migrant platform workers.

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Appendices

Appendix A-1: Informational flyer in Australia


THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Are you delivering ON PLATFORM?

 **EASI**
No.1 Asian Food Delivery

Tell us your stories

The University of Sydney is conducting research on the impacts of food-delivery workers' migrant status on their work choices.

 **Uber Eats**

 熊猫外卖
HungryPanda

 **deliveroo**

 **DOORDASH**

We are seeking **migrant** individuals who do food-delivery.

Participation consists of a 45-60 minutes interview via **phone** or **in person** at your convenience.

Any data collected will be treated with strict confidentiality. The project is subjected to an Ethics Approval.

If you would be willing to assist us with this project and participate in it, please contact me to organise a time

MS JIAYI SUN (VIVIAN)
M: 0405 985 868
WECHAT: VIVISUN_29
EMAIL:
JSUN4399@UNI.SYDNEY.EDU.AU



Appendix A-2: Informational flyer in China




THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Are you delivering ON PLATFORM?

分享出你的故事

我们是来自悉尼大学的一组研究团队，目前正在进行一项关于外来务工者的移民身份对于选择外卖平台工作的影响。

我们希望找到正在外卖平台上（e.g. 饿了么，美团）工作的你们来参与我们的项目，帮助我们更好地了解相关信息。

我们将会进行一个简单的45-60分钟左右的电话或当面采访，时间和地点可以由您来决定。

所有收集到的数据以及参与者的个人信息都会是匿名并严格保密处理。项目的全过程都将遵循道德准则。

如果你愿意参与我们的项目，欢迎联系本人

孙嘉仪 (VIVIAN)
电话: +86 13660626713
微信: VIVISUN_29
EMAIL: JSUN4399@UNI.SYDNEY.EDU.AU



Appendix B-1: Interview questions in Australia

Participant Personal Background

- Where are you from? (Country/City)
- How old are you?
- What is your educational background?
- Are you an Australian citizen, permanent resident or temporary resident?
 - If temporary resident, which visa are you currently on?
- How long have you been in Australia? Or When did you come to Australia?
 - Do you come to Australia on your own? Does any of your family members come with you?

About food-delivery work

Rationale for starting food- delivery work

- How long have you been undertaking food-delivery work in Sydney?
- Why did you decide to do food-delivery work here?
 - How did you find out about delivery work? What prompted you to sign up?
 - Did you rely on your co-ethnic network on finding this job?
- How many platforms do you currently work for? Which ones are they?
 - Which platforms do you work, or have you worked for in the last twelve months?
 - What were the main reasons that you decided to work for this/these platforms?
- Have you worked for any other platforms as well? Which ones were they? Why did you stop working for them?
- What type of contractual arrangement do you have with the platform? Do you have an employment contract or are you working on the platform as an independent contractor?
 - Have they shown you any official documents that clearly stating out your working rights and rules, as well as payment?
- Do you have any other paid jobs besides your delivery work?
 - What sort of work is this?
- What jobs did you do before doing delivery work?
 - Why did you leave/change your job?
 - How does food-delivery work compare to your previous work experiences?

Work experience and process of the food-delivery job

- What type of transport are you using for your delivery work (bicycle, scooter, car etc.)?
 - Did the platform provide you with any materials to undertake the work, did you buy it from the platform, or did you rent/lease any materials?
- Can you explain the sign up process, what did you need to do before you could work on the platform:
 - What type of information did you have to provide to the platform (e.g. driver's license, ABN, visa)?
 - Did you sign any contracts with the platforms when you registered for it?

- Can you briefly explain the process of making a delivery?
- How regularly do you undertake delivery work?
- How long do you often work on food-delivery?
 - Which times and days do you usually work?
- How is it determined where you work and which areas you service?
 - Who makes this choice?
- How safe do you find delivery work?

Remuneration

- How are you get paid? How do the platform document it?
 - Did you receive any detailed records of each delivery and transaction?
 - Have you worried about not being paid fairly and correctly?
- How is your pay rate determined? Any bonus system in place?
 - Do you know beforehand how much you are getting per delivery?
- How much money would you make from a typical day/shift in a typical week?
 - What do you use this money for, e.g. is it mainly used to cover your living costs, or do you remit some of it to your family members?
- Do you have any tricks or tactics to improve your income? What are they?
- Are you insured to undertake delivery work?
 - Who provides the insurance? You or the platform?
- Have your platforms provided you any information on your taxation requirements?

Work interactions

- How is your interaction with the *platform(s)*?
- How is your interaction with the *restaurants/shopkeepers* during your working hours?
- How is your interactions with the *customers/clients*?
- How is your interaction *with other people working on the platforms*?
 - How are your relations with other workers on the platforms? How do you engage with them (e.g. face-to-face, online forums, group chats)?
 - How did you get to know them?
 - What type of interactions do you have with them? (e.g. social or work-related).

Perception of the work

- What aspects of your job do you enjoy?
- What aspects of your job do you not enjoy?
- How flexible do you find your food-delivery work?
- How long do you plan to work in food-delivery sector?
 - What might trigger you to leave?

About Migration Life

Rationale for migrating to Australia

- How long have you been in Australia?
- Why did you come to Australia? What prompted you to make this decision?
- Why did you start working here?
 - Have you undertaken any other jobs before joining food-delivery?
 - Have you considered other jobs before deciding to work on food-delivery platforms?
 - What are some other available jobs to you?

Migrant status

- Which type of visa are you currently holding?
 - Have you used any other types of visas before? What prompted you to change to your current visa?
- How does your visa type/migrant status affect your job choices? (*e.g. job-finding processes; working hours; payment and taxes issues*)
 - Did you come across any problems (particularly with your visa type or as a migrant worker) in job finding?
 - Are you subject to any restrictions, or do you find any constraints in job choices?
- Do you have restrictions on work rights (e.g., working hours) with your current visa?
- Have you experienced any other restrictions related to your visa type?
- Do you need to pay taxes or Did you pay taxes for your income?
- What language do you usually use during your working process? Do you have any language barrier at work?
 - As a migrant worker, how did you find it if you can't speak English well at work?
- Do you have any social connections with your home country community groups?
 - How did you build up your connection with them?
 - How do they affect your work and life?

Temporal horizons of the stay

- How long do you plan to stay/work in Australia? Why?
 - How long are you allowed to stay under your current visa type?
 - Have you changed your plans since you come to Australia?
- For those who plan to stay longer: how are you going to extend your stay?
- For those who aspire for permanent residency: How are you going to get permanent residency?
- How does it affect your job choices in the labour market?

Appendix B-2: Interview questions in China

Participant Personal Background

- Where are you originally from? (registered city on *hukou*)
- How old are you?
- What is your educational background?
- How long have you been in Guangzhou? Or When did you come to Guangzhou?
 - Do you come to Guangzhou on your own? Does any of your family members come with you?

About food-delivery work

Rationale for starting food- delivery work

- How long have you been undertaking food- delivery work in Guangzhou?
- Why did you decide to do food-delivery work here?
 - How did you find out about delivery work? What prompted you to sign up?
 - Did you rely on your co-ethnic network on finding this job?
- How many platforms do you currently work for? Which ones are they?
 - Which platforms do you work, or have you worked for in the last twelve months?
 - What were the main reasons that you decided to work for this/these platforms?
- Have you worked for any other platforms as well? Which ones were they? Why did you stop working for them?
- What type of contractual arrangement do you have with the platform? Do you have an employment contract or are you working on the platform as an independent contractor?
 - Have they shown you any official documents that clearly stating out your working rights and rules, as well as payment?
- Do you have any other paid jobs besides your delivery work?
 - What sort of work is this?
- What jobs did you do before doing delivery work?
 - Why did you leave/change your job?
 - How does food-delivery work compare to your previous work experiences?

Work experience and process of the food-delivery job

- Which work mode are you currently engaged in? (*Zhuansong* or *zhongbao* or anything else)
 - Can you briefly explain the differences based on your understandings of these two work arrangements?
 - Have you engaged in the other one before? Why did you switch to your current one?
- What type of transport are you using for your delivery work (bicycle, scooter, car etc.)?
 - Did the platform provide you with any materials to undertake the work, did you buy it from the platform, or did you rent/lease any materials?
- Can you explain the sign up process, what did you need to do before you could work on the platform:
 - What type of information did you have to provide to the platform (e.g. driver's license, ID check)?

- Did you sign any contracts with the platforms when you registered for it?
- Can you briefly explain the process of making a delivery?
- How regularly do you undertake delivery work?
- How long do you often work on food-delivery?
 - Which times and days do you usually work?
- How is it determined where you work and which areas you service?
 - Who makes this choice?
- How safe do you find delivery work?

Remuneration

- How are you get paid? How do the platform document it?
 - Did you receive any detailed records of each delivery and transaction?
 - Have you worried about not being paid fairly and correctly?
- How is your pay rate determined? Any bonus system in place?
 - Do you know beforehand how much you are getting per delivery?
- How much money would you make from a typical day/shift in a typical week?
 - What do you use this money for, e.g. is it mainly used to cover your living costs, or do you remit some of it to your family members?
- Do you have any tricks or tactics to improve your income? What are they?
- Are you insured to undertake delivery work?
 - Who provides the insurance? You or the platform?
- Have your platforms provided you any information on your taxation requirements?

Work interactions

- How is your interaction with the *platform(s)*?
 - If outsourced *zhuan song* workers, how is the interaction with service station managers?
 - To what extent can they determine or affect your work experiences?
- How is your interaction with the *restaurants/shopkeepers* during your working hours?
- How is your interactions with the *customers/clients*?
- How is your interaction *with other people working on the platforms*?
 - How are your relations with other workers on the platforms? How do you engage with them (e.g. face-to-face, online forums, group chats)?
 - How did you get to know them?
 - What type of interactions do you have with them? (E.g. social or work-related).

Perception of the work

- What aspects of your job do you enjoy?
- What aspects of your job do you not enjoy?
- How flexible do you find your food-delivery work?
- How long do you plan to work in food-delivery sector?
 - What might trigger you to leave?

About Migration Life

Rationale for migrating to Guangzhou

- How long have you been in Guangzhou?
- Why did you come to Guangzhou? What prompted you to make this decision?
- Why did you start working here?
 - Have you undertaken any other jobs before joining food-delivery?
 - Have you considered other jobs before deciding to work on food-delivery platforms?
 - What are some other available jobs to you?

Migrant status

- What is your current *hukou* type/status?
- How does your *hukou* status affect your job choices? (e.g. *job-finding processes; working hours; payment and taxes issues*)
 - Did you come across any problems (particularly with your *hukou* type or as a rural-to-urban migrant worker) in job finding?
 - Are you subject to any restrictions, or do you find any constraints in job choices?
- Do you have restrictions on work rights (e.g., working hours) with your current non-local *hukou*?
- Have you experienced any other restrictions related to your non-local *hukou*? (e.g. social entitlements in education, healthcare)
- Do you need to pay taxes or Did you pay taxes for your income?
- Do you have any social connections with your *laoxiang*?
 - How did you build up your connection with them?
 - How do they affect your work and life?

Temporal horizons of the stay

- How long do you plan to stay/work in Guangzhou? Why?
- For those who plan to stay longer or aspire for permanent residency: Are you planning to obtain a local Guangzhou *hukou*? Why or Why not?
 - What are some potential or feasible approaches you are going to take to get local *hukou*?
 - To what extent do you think it is feasible for you?
 - To what extent do you think this is affecting your decisions on whether to stay or not?
- How does it affect your job choices in the labour market?



Participant Information Statement

Research Study: The Impacts of Workers' Migrant Status on Food-Delivery Workers' Work Choices

Associate Professor, Dr Sunghoon Kim

Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies, The University of Sydney Business School

Phone: +61 2 8627 9176 | Email: sunghoon.kim@sydney.edu.au

PhD Candidate, Jiayi Sun (PhD student) | Email: jsun4399@uni.sydney.edu.au

1. What is this study about?

We are conducting a research study about the impacts of platform workers' migrant status on their work choices in this job. The aim of the project is to investigate how temporary migrant status (internal and international) affects workers' motivations of choosing potentially precarious platform work.

Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand or want to know more about.

2. Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researchers:

- Dr Sunghoon Kim (Associate Professor), University of Sydney Business School
- Dr Chris F Wright (Associate Professor), University of Sydney Business School
- Dr Alex Veen (Senior Lecturer), University of Sydney Business School
- Ms Jiayi Sun, PhD Student, University of Sydney Business School

Student declaration

Ms Jiayi Sun is conducting this study as the basis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Sydney, Australia. This will take place under the supervision of Dr Sunghoon Kim, Dr Chris F Wright, and Dr Alex Veen.

3. Who can take part in the study?

We are seeking food-delivery platform workers who are temporary migrant workers in Australia and rural-to-urban migrant workers in China. In this study, rural-to-urban migrant workers in China and international temporary migrant workers on various visa types in

Australia will be the focus because they tend to share more similarities in such aspects as the driving forces of migration and limitations in accessing institutional assistance, which may have crucial impacts on work choices of platform work.

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are working at food-delivery platforms as a temporary migrant worker, and thus can have insights on how the migrant status affects your work choices. Taking part in this study is voluntary.

4. What will the study involve for me?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate a semi-structured interview, discussing your work experiences and work choices of platform work, at a time and place of your convenience. You will be asked to talk about how the work is being managed by you, how your migrant status influenced you during job-seeking process, and how you interact and build networks with people coming from the same country/city as you.

You are welcome to use English, Mandarin or/and Cantonese, whichever of these languages that is more comfortable for you.

It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. We would like to record the interview with your permission, otherwise research notes will be taken.

All your personal information and any provided identifiable information will be treated as strictly confidential. Information from this project will only be used for the indicated research purposes. Your name and/or any identifiable details will not be used in any publication arising out of the research. All data will be kept in a de-identifiable format and will be stored in a secure location; digital files will be password-encrypted and stored on secure devices, which are only accessible by the student researcher and the supervisors.

As an interviewee, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview on request.

5. Can I withdraw once I've started?

Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at The University of Sydney.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind you can withdraw at any time. You can do this by directly contacting the investigators.

If you choose to withdraw, we will not collect any more information from you. Please let us know at the time you withdraw what you would like us to do with information we have collected about you up to that point.

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.

6. Are there any risks or costs?

There are no costs of participation other than your time. Your participation is on a voluntary basis and the interview will be conducted at a time and place at your convenience. You can also stop the interview at any time and resume it later.

To protect your relationship with the platform any identifying information (e.g. your name) will be de-identified and replaced by a secure code and kept confidential. All data will be stored in secure locations.

7. Are there any benefits?

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in the study.

8. What will happen to information that is collected?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting information about you for the purposes of this study.

Any information you provide us will be stored securely and we will only disclose it with your permission, unless we are required by law to release information. We are planning for the study findings to be published and/or presented at conferences. You will not be individually identifiable in these publications/conference presentations.

We would like to record the interview with your permission, otherwise research notes will be taken. All data gathered will be kept in a de-identified format and replaced by a secure code. Data will be stored in a secure location; digital files will be encrypted and stored on secure devices which are only accessible by the student researcher and supervisor.

Data gathered will be securely stored for a minimum period of 5 years after the completion of the research project.

9. Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form and providing your contact details on it. This feedback will be in the form of a brief lay summary. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

10. What if I would like further information?

When you have read this information, the following researcher/s will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have:

- Ms Jiayi Sun, PhD student, the University of Sydney Business School. Phone: 04 0598 5868 (in Australia), (+86) 13660626713 (in China), or Email: jsun4399@uni.sydney.edu.au

11. What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of The University of Sydney [2022/407] according to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*.

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the University:

Human Ethics Manager
human.ethics@sydney.edu.au
+61 2 8627 8176

This information sheet is for you to keep

Participant Consent Form

Research Study: The Impacts of Workers' Migrant Status on Food-Delivery Workers' Work Choices

Associate Professor, Dr Sunghoon Kim

Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies, The University of Sydney Business School

Phone: +61 2 8627 9176 | Email: sunghoon.kim@sydney.edu.au

PhD Candidate, Jiayi Sun (PhD student) | Email: jsun4399@uni.sydney.edu.au

Participant Name _____

I agree to take part in this research study. In giving my consent, I confirm that:

- The details of my involvement have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written Participant Information Statement to keep.
- I understand the purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of workers' migrant status on work choices, particularly the food-delivery platform work.
- I acknowledge that the risks and benefits of participating in this study have been explained to me to my satisfaction.
- I understand that in this study I will be required to participate in interviews, answering questions on a voluntary basis.
- I understand that my participation may be audio-recorded.
- I understand that my information may be used in future research, in conference presentations and/or published papers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary.
- I am assured that my decision to participate will not have any impact on my relationship with the research team or the University of Sydney.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study and that I can choose to withdraw any information I have already provided (unless the data has already been de-identified or published).

- I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be protected and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.
- I confirm the following:

I consent to recordings (audio) Yes No

I would like to review my interview transcripts Yes No

I consent to being contacted for future studies Yes No

I consent to my data being used in future research Yes No

I would like feedback on the overall results of this study Yes No

If you answered **yes**, please provide your preferred contact details (email/telephone/postal address):

- I understand that after I sign and return this consent form it will be retained by the researcher, and that I may request a copy at any time.

Participant Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____