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Navigating restricted social rights: networked individualism as a coping mechanism for undocumented Chinese immigrants in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how networked individualism was, as opposed to traditional migrant networks, utilized by post-COVID-19 undocumented Chinese immigrants to cope with restricted social rights and socioeconomic constraints upon arrival in the United States. Drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation in a Chinese ethnoburb in the San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles, we found that these immigrants had few connections to established migrant networks and diasporic Chinese communities, but managed to exercise individual agency to leverage online platforms to crowdsource information and resources conducive to migrant adaptation. However, while it helped ease precarity in housing, employment, and legal status, networked individualism reinforced undocumented immigrants' disengagement from both their ethnic community and the larger society, which exacerbated their double marginalization and posed challenges to their social mobility. Our paper contributes to migration scholarship by theorizing how social networks evolve in the era of digital globalization to shape migrant adaptation.

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Introduction

In the post-COVID-19 era, undocumented Chinese immigration, also referred to as *zouxian* – walking the line – witnessed a sudden surge,¹ with the number of Chinese nationals apprehended at the U.S. southwestern border increasing from 1,970 in 2022 to 24,048 in 2023, and further to 37,833 in 2024 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2025).² This dramatic increase is tied to the broader shifts in undocumented immigration patterns arguably following the termination of Title 42 Expulsions in May 2023, which allows for the resumption of standard asylum processing while imposing stricter penalties for unauthorized entry and reentry (Gramlich 2022). Simultaneously, this trend highlights the significant role of digital mediation in international migration. Undocumented immigrants are increasingly using social media and other information and communication

technologies (ICTs) to share information and resources and to facilitate their cross-border movements (Dekker and Engbersen 2014). Upon arrival in the U.S., the question of whether undocumented immigrants should have equal social rights like housing, employment, and legal counsel as citizens remains a hotly debated topic. This issue is a central point of contention not only in the U.S. but also in other capitalist welfare and immigration regimes worldwide (Dean 2015). Existing literature reveals how undocumented immigrants, as well as low-skilled legal immigrants, creatively mitigate restricted access to social rights, through grassroots activism to assert rights-based claims (Swerts and Nicholls 2021); support from civil society institutions, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Sidney 2019); paid services provided by the migration industry (McCollum and Findlay 2018); and resources from migrant networks and ethnic communities (Massey and España 1987; Zhou 1992).

Our paper examines an emerging yet understudied coping mechanism: networked individualism. We focus on how undocumented immigrants use individualized loosely-bounded networks facilitated by digital technologies to navigate challenges in their adaptation. With rapid advancement in ICTs, social networks have moved from densely-knit and tightly-bounded groups to far-flung, sparsely-knit, loosely-bounded, and fragmented networks centered on the individual (Wellman 2001). Networked individualism, as Rainie and Wellman (2012, 12) argue, allows individuals to maintain “partial membership in multiple networks” rather than relying on “permanent memberships in settled groups,” or densely-knit “little boxes” (Wellman and Hampton 1999, 648). Our paper engages with the concept to address a central research question: how does networked individualism serve as a coping mechanism for undocumented immigrants to navigate restricted social rights? We zoom in on the case of *zouxian* people to unfold the process of social network transformation in the era of digital globalization and its impact on migrant adaptation.

Liminality and access to social rights

Social rights are defined as “socially negotiated expressions of human needs,” such as rights to livelihood (e.g. work and subsistence) and to human services (e.g. shelter, education, and healthcare) (Dean 2015, 148). The citizenship-based conception of these rights restricts undocumented immigrants’ access to them. For example, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act requires all U.S. employers to use Form I-9 to verify an employees’ identity and employment eligibility. The law also criminalizes those who knowingly hire unauthorized workers. This policy effectively restricts undocumented immigrants from entering the formal labor market. Furthermore, the liminal status exposes undocumented immigrants to other forms of employment precarity, such as low wages, poor working conditions, illegibility for unemployment benefits, and limited prospects of upward mobility (Gleeson 2010; Menjivar 2000). Undocumented immigrants often internalize their marginalization by viewing precarious work as “temporary and endurable” while embracing an “extreme work ethic” that discourages them from asserting their rights (Gleeson 2010, 594). Their reluctance to file claims after workplace violations stems from two main factors: a lack of knowledge about their labor rights and a deep-seated fear of being discovered and deported (Gleeson 2010). In addition, undocumented immigrants confront housing precarity. They are less likely to be homeowners and more likely to

live in overcrowded units with hazards like holes in walls, pests, and exposed wires, often in low-quality neighborhoods (Hall and Greenman 2013). Moreover, their access to health-care and social services is restricted due to their immigration status (Hall, Olivero, and Gleeson 2025). They also face significant barriers to adjusting their legal status, a process that is often time-consuming, costly, and arbitrary.

Undocumented immigrants' "liminal legality" makes them "hyper aware" of the power of the law in their daily lives and of their constant "deportability" (De Genova 2002; Menjívar 2011, 383). While these immigrants are restricted from accessing social rights, living under "the *threat* or *perceived threat* of being targeted for deportation" not only creates everyday fear, anxiety, and stress but also exacerbates family fragmentation and economic uncertainty (García 2018, 222). However, it is important to note that, while federal policies restrict their social rights, sanctuary states like California, Oregon, and Illinois offer certain protections and benefits. For example, the California Values Act limits the cooperation of state and local law enforcement with federal immigration authorities and ensure that public schools, libraries, and health facilities are safe spaces for undocumented immigrants. Other state-level provisions, such as the California Immigrant Worker Protection Act and the California Immigrant Tenant Protection Act, further expand their access to social rights. This helps explain why undocumented immigrants are more likely to settle in states where statutory provisions and policies counteract restrictive federal immigration laws.

The role of meso-level institutions

To cope with legal and political barriers to social rights, immigrants often turn to meso-level institutions such as the ethnic community, for-profit intermediaries that may or may not be linked to the ethnic community, and NGOs for critical support. A pre-existing ethnic community is usually the first place to which immigrants, especially those of underprivileged legal and socioeconomic statuses, turn. The ethnic community, along with its businesses and sociocultural institutions, provides tangible and intangible resources, such as information, knowledge, services, and jobs, as well as a sense of identity, belonging, and shared fate, that facilitate their settlement and adaptation in the host society (Portes and Bach 1985; Zhou 1992). For example, New York City's Chinatown has long offered jobs, housing, and other basic services to new immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, who lack English language proficiency and access to affordable housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities and transferable skills in the formal labor market (Zhou 1992). Yet, the ethnic community may not fully compensate for restricted social rights and sometimes may even be sources of "internal conflicts, exclusion, and in, some cases, coercion" (Zhou and Kim 2006, 245). Ethnic employers may underpay coethnic workers while resource scarcity can breed competition rather than ethnic solidarity among coethnics (Kwong 1997; Menjívar 2000).

Another important meso-level institution is for-profit intermediaries, known as the migration industry, consisting of "entrepreneurs, firms and services which, chiefly motivated by financial gain, facilitate international mobility, settlement and adaptation, as well as communication and resource transfers of migrants and their families across borders" (Hernández-León 2013, 25). The wide range of intermediaries, including legal recruitment agencies and illegal smuggling organizations, offer paid services to enable immigrants to

cross borders and find employment and/or housing upon arrival in destinations (Chin 1999; Hernández-León 2013; Keefe 2010; McCollum and Findlay 2018). One distinct feature of the migration industry is its ethnic character, such as Chinese “snakeheads” and Mexican “coyotes,” with different levels of embeddedness in the ethnic community. Intermediaries that are highly embedded in coethnic networks usually offer one-stop services to coethnic members, as experienced by undocumented Chinese immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s (Keefe 2010). Piecemeal paid services are usually provided for those coethnics who are not connected to traditional migrant networks or for non-coethnic members. While the migration industry facilitates cross-border movements and migrant adaptation in the host society, it often exposes immigrants to coethnic exploitation. For example, undocumented Fujianese immigrants in the 1990s were described as being “trapped in a state of virtual indentured servitude” (Kwong 1997, 101). These undocumented immigrants, also referred to as “snake people,” were tightly controlled by smuggling organizations, known as “snakeheads.” While both snake people and snakeheads were tied to their hometowns and diasporic communities, the latter could rely on coethnic networks to effectively collect debts for unauthorized border crossing of the former who must pay through their unpaid labor or low wages working for years in ethnic economies.

NGOs are also key meso-level institutions that help immigrants access social rights. NGOs are not ethnically bounded. As “arrival infrastructures,” they provide direct aid and/or advocate for policy changes on behalf of underprivileged immigrants and refugees regardless of race/ethnicity (Sidney 2019, 53). For example, founded in 1978, Human Rights First is one of pro bono legal service providers that help low-income undocumented immigrants and their families seek asylum (U.S. Department of Justice 2025). In resistance to punitive and exclusionary laws and policies that restrict undocumented immigrants’ access to social rights, NGOs often organize protest campaigns, such as the 2006 immigrant rights protests, the 2014 #Not1MoreDeportation Campaign, and the 2025 “A Day without Immigrants,” to advocate for policy changes (Swerts and Nicholls 2021). NGOs, positioning immigrants as contributors to the U.S. economy and society, also challenge the media and political elites’ narratives that dehumanize undocumented immigrants as threats (Sidney 2019). While NGOs diligently advocate for undocumented immigrants’ equal access to social rights, their success has been mixed due to larger structural constraints, limited capacity, and unstable funding (Sidney 2019).

Migrant networks and social capital formation

Social networks offer distinct values and utility for relationship formation and maintenance, information sharing and access, community building, job and other opportunity searching, and rights claiming. Granovetter (1973) distinguishes between strong and weak ties in interpersonal networks. Unlike strong ties, which often provide redundant information due to network closure and homogeneity, weak ties offer access to new ideas, influences, and information from individuals across diverse social groups (Granovetter 1973, 1370–1371). Moreover, social networks are not static but form “a continuum of dynamic relationships that evolve and change over time” (Ryan 2023, 3).

The theory of migrant networks assumes that these networks are closely-knit ties based on family, friendship, and shared origin. It posits that migrant networks constitute crucial sources of social capital facilitating migration. Network expansion further reduces “the direct, opportunity, and psychic costs of international movement” and increases the expected gains of migration. It also helps sustain migration flows even after the initial incentives to migrate have diminished (Massey and España 1987, 734).

Trust is a foundational element inherent in traditional migrant networks. It is not a general feeling of security, but a specific form of “enforceable trust,” a type of social capital built upon shared identity and “bounded solidarity,” where in-group cultural norms, reciprocity, and mutual obligations create a system of social control that ensures compliance and support (Portes 1998; Portes and Zhou 1992). Flores-Yeffal (2012) found that Mexican immigrants relied on their hometown trust networks to navigate the challenges of their undocumented status. However, their lives were so closely tied to these homogeneous networks that their access to a broader range of information and resources for job opportunities and upward mobility remained limited. Furthermore, these trust-based strong ties are not always a source of support. As Menjívar (2000) showed, these ties could become fragmented, causing resentment and conflict. This was particularly true for underprivileged Salvadoran immigrants, where the community lacked sufficient resources to maintain the norms of reciprocity.

However, not all social networks generate equally valuable social capital. The volume and value of social capital depend on network size, network structure (e.g. strength of ties, closure vs. openness, structural equivalence vs. nonequivalence), and the amount and quality of network resources (e.g. information, support, and influence) (Bourdieu 1986; Portes 1998). Putnam (2000) identifies two forms of social capital, bonding and bridging social capital. Inward-looking and exclusive, bonding capital are associated with tightly-knit, homogeneous ties (e.g. family members, close friends, and neighbors). It provides practical and emotional support that enables people to get by. For instance, Stack (1974, 28) showed that African Americans in a poor community in the Midwest relied on “extensive networks of kin and friends” as a survival strategy to cope with poverty. In contrast, bridging capital is found within a loosely-knit, heterogeneous group composed of individuals across social strata (e.g. workmates and members of a football club). Outward-looking and inclusive, it provides new information, resources, and opportunities that help people get ahead (Putnam 2000). Empirical findings show that bridging capital functions like weak ties, more instrumental than bonding or strong ties for labor market integration of immigrants (Lancee 2010).

However, social capital can be a mixed blessing. Portes (1998, 15) highlights the need to acknowledge “negative social capital.” Tightly-knit social groups such as mafia families and youth inner-city gangs enjoy the benefits of group cohesion and solidarity at the cost of excluding outsiders from access, restricting personal autonomy and freedom, and even enforcing “downward leveling norms” (Portes 1998, 8). Liu-Farrer (2008) found that tightly-knit ethnic networks among Fujianese immigrants in Japan made visa overstaying a norm rather than a stigma within their community, which functioned to reinforce their undocumented status and constrain upward mobility. Additionally, access to social capital is unequal among persons “because of their advantaged or disadvantaged structural positions and social networks” shaped by factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, and culture (Lin 1999, 483).

Networked individualism as a coping mechanism: an analytical framework

Wellman and his colleagues introduced networked individualism to explain how social networks have changed as a result of advancement in ICTs. They describe these new networks as being broader, more diverse, yet looser, more fragmented, and more specialized than traditional social groups (Rainie and Wellman 2012; Wellman 2001; Wellman and Hampton 1999). This shift from traditional groups to individualized networks helps explain the emerging phenomenon of social network transformation in the era of digital globalization, where “the new media is the new neighborhood” (Rainie and Wellman 2012, 12). Thus, networked individualism is not based on established communal bonds but instead emphasizes personal autonomy and independent rationality as individuals make decisions primarily based on their own needs, often “without much consideration for the overall community benefit” (Lyu and Zhu 2024, 3). Individuals also exercise their agency to proactively construct diverse networks and access resources for various purposes. Vacca, Cañarte, and Vitale (2022) found that marginalized and stigmatized Roma immigrants in France strategically maintain and mobilize diverse networks for specialized support. However, individual agency and personal autonomy, as embodied in networked individualism, cannot be overstated, since structural forces, such as hierarchies along racial, gender, and class lines, shape how individuals form ties and derive benefits from them (Chua 2013). For example, white men are found to be more likely to be embedded in networks that help them with job search and promotion compared to minorities and women (Smith 2000). Differential socioeconomic statuses lead to unequal access to ICTs, such as computers, the Internet, and smartphones, which affects how social networks contribute to unequal outcomes in the digital era (van Dijk 2006, 221–222).

We draw on the concept of networked individualism and propose an analytical framework to examine how this new type of individualized social network can be utilized as a coping mechanism by underprivileged immigrants to navigate restricted social rights. We argue that networked individualism differs from traditional migrant networks in social capital formation, leading to variation in migrant adaptation outcomes. As Figure 1 illustrates, traditional migrant networks are characterized by both strong and weak ties that are highly embedded in, or linked to, social structures that span from hometown to diasporic communities, and often involve intermediaries that are also likely part of these transnational networks. These ties produce both bonding capital, which is highly valuable for providing mutual support and maintained by trust and strong social control mechanisms within the coethnic group, and bridging capital, which can connect immigrants to resources and opportunities outside of their immediate coethnic circle. In contrast, networked individualism is not embedded in coethnic social structures. The ties that it creates are typically weak ties, with few strong ties. These weak ties involve intermediaries and NGOs that are themselves loosely connected, lacking trust and social control. For the *zouxian* people, who lacked connections to established migrant networks both in China and the diaspora, they had to, and believed they could, exercise individual agency to navigate restricted social rights, by leveraging digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, as well as intermediaries and NGOs. Guided by our analytical framework, we unfold the story of newly arrived *zouxian* people below to show how effectively networked individualism was utilized as a coping mechanism for their adaptation.

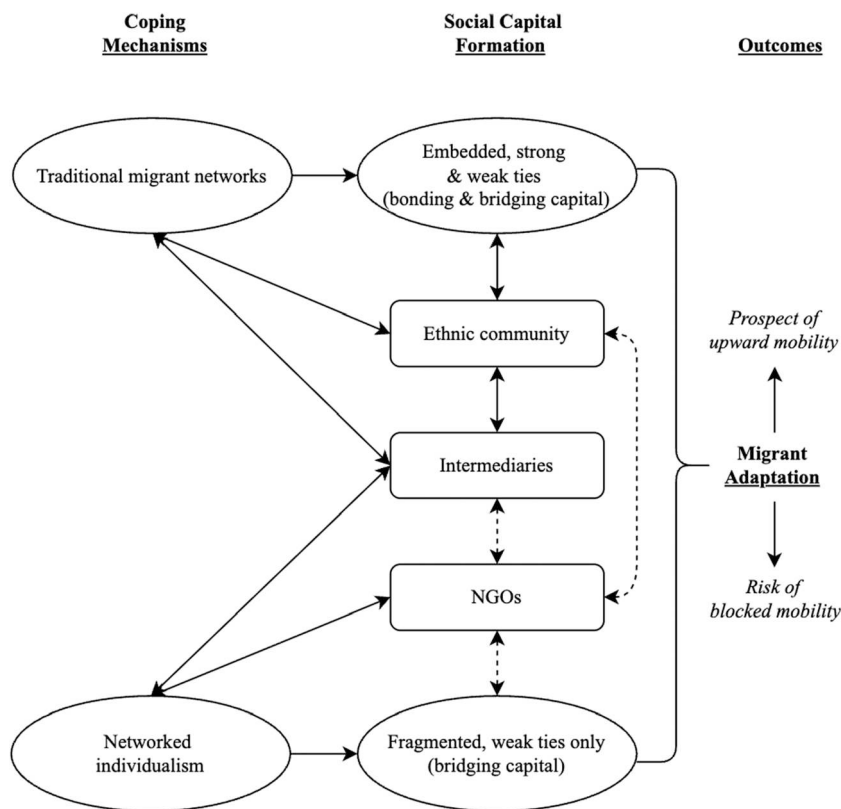


Figure 1. Networked individualism v. traditional migrant networks as coping mechanisms: An analytical framework.

Methods and data

Research site: the Chinese ethnoburb in the San Gabriel Valley, California

The San Gabriel Valley (SGV), east of downtown Los Angeles, is the hub of an ever-expanding Chinese ethnoburb. Perpetuated by the immigrant growth machines fueled by foreign capital investment, an ethnic real estate market and businesses rapidly developed in Monterey Park to attract immigrants first from Taiwan and Hong Kong and later from mainland China since the 1970s (Li 1998; Lin and Chiong 2016). The share of Chinese population grew dramatically, from 0.9% in 1960 to 36.2% in 1990, and nearly 60% in 2020 (Zhou and DiRago 2023). As the population grew exponentially in Monterey Park, neighboring cities in the SGV, such as Alhambra, Rosemead, San Gabriel, Arcadia, and San Marino became popular ethnoburbs as well. With the arrival of Chinese immigrants with significant human, financial, and ethnic capital, ethnic economies thrived in these ethnoburbs. As of 2020, it was estimated that there were more than 150 businesses per 1,000 residents in the core of the Chinese ethnoburb (Monterey Park, Alhambra, Rosemead, and San Gabriel) and 91% of these businesses were minority-owned, mostly Chinese-owned (Zhou and DiRago 2023). Undocumented Chinese immigrants with few connections to coethnic migrant networks are drawn to the SGV's Chinese ethnoburb

in large numbers not so much by choice but by forced choice because resources needed for their initial resettlement are not easily accessible in the larger society. We chose the SGV as our research site because it has served as a unique context of reception for Chinese immigrants, regardless of immigration status, and the first landing spot for many *zouxian* people.

Data

We combined data collected from interviews and participant observation in SGV's Chinese ethnoburb. We conducted 71 in-depth interviews of those recruited from snow-balling or face-to-face encounters in ethnic institutions, family motels, or on streets from October 2023 to October 2024.³ Although our sampling was through snow-balling and non-random, it captured the general story line and nuances of *zouxian* people. We also conducted participant observation at key sites of their everyday life with a focus on the core of the ethnoburb in Monterey Park where migration-related businesses such as family motels, employment agencies, and law offices are concentrated and where Fatty Ding's Plaza serve as a popular gathering spot for undocumented immigrants. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for our 71 interviewees. Most interviewees were male (81.7%) and in working ages with 31% under 35, 31% between 35 and 45, and 33.8% between 46 and 55. On marital status, 22.5% were single, about half married or partnered, and 26.8% divorced. They came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. While 53.5% received less than high school education, about one in five had a bachelor's degree or higher. Their occupations were diverse: nearly a quarter were self-employed, 22.5% held professional positions, 12.7% in sales and service, and another quarter in manufacturing with 10% in semi-skilled manufacturing jobs. Most of them had annual earnings above the middle-income level in China: 36.6% earned less than 100,000 RMB (13,889 USD) annually, and the rest earned more with 11.3% earning 200,000 RMB (27,778 USD) or more.⁴ Reflecting on the general trend, most interviewees (81.7%) arrived in the U.S. in the peak year of 2023, with 10 arriving in 2024 and three between 2021 and 2022. They hailed from diverse places of origin across China, including Henan, Hubei, Shandong, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Guangxi, and elsewhere in China (42.3%) with two persons from Latin America. Most of them traveled alone and about a third traveled with their families. Most of them (71.8%) had no preexisting social ties in the U.S. About two thirds of them learned about unauthorized entry into the U.S. through a major Chinese social media platform *Douyin*, while the rest from other online sources, such as *WeChat*, *Telegram*, and *Twitter*. All interviewees either had applied for or were in the process of applying for asylum, to obtain work authorization, but none had adjusted their immigration status yet at the time of the interview.

Results

Networked individualism as a coping mechanism

Lacking access to pre-existing ethnic migrant networks and excluded from the mainstream host society, *zouxian* people were drawn to SGV's Chinese ethnoburb, an ethnic community full of information and resources, in large numbers even though many had

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of interviewees (N = 71).

Characteristic		%	N
Sex	Male	81.7	58
	Female	18.3	13
Age	Under 35	31.0	22
	36–45	31.0	22
	46–55	33.8	24
	Over 55	4.2	3
Marital status	Single	22.5	16
	Divorced	26.8	19
	Married or partnered	50.7	36
Education	Less than high school education	53.5	38
	High school diploma or associate degree	26.8	19
	Bachelor's degree or over	19.7	14
Pre-emigration occupation	Self-employed	23.9	17
	Professionals	22.5	16
	Sales and services	12.7	9
	Manufacturing (semi-skilled)	10.0	7
	Manufacturing (low-skilled)	23.9	17
	Homemakers	4.2	3
	Unemployed	2.8	2
Pre-emigration annual earnings (in RMB) ¹	Less than 100,000	36.6	26
	100,000–199,999	36.6	26
	200,000 or more	11.3	8
	No answer	15.5	11
Places of origin	Henan	15.5	11
	Hubei	14.1	10
	Shandong	8.5	6
	Liaoning	5.6	4
	Jiangsu	5.6	4
	Guangxi	5.6	4
	Elsewhere in China	42.3	30
	Latin America	2.8	2
Travel type	Single adult	66.2	47
	Family	33.8	24
Year of arrival	Prior to 2023	4.2	3
	2023	81.7	58
	2024	14.1	10
Pre-existing social ties in the U.S.	None	71.8	51
	Weak ties (friends of friends, alumni, or acquaintances)	12.7	9
	Strong ties (family and/or friends)	15.5	11
First source of <i>zouxian</i> -related information prior to departure	<i>Douyin</i>	67.6	48
	Others (e.g. <i>WeChat</i> , <i>Telegram</i> , <i>Twitter</i>)	32.4	23

¹1 USD = 7.2 RMB in 2023–24.

no desire to go there or to stay there for long. In Monterey Park, particularly in neighborhoods around Fatty Ding's Plaza, there was a robust informal housing market catering to the housing needs of underprivileged Chinese immigrants. Family motels offered low-cost, accessible, and flexible accommodations (Wang 2020). These motels charged the daily rent for a bed ranging from \$15 to \$20 and provided free access to cooking essentials, laundry facilities, and most importantly WiFi. Moreover, family motels were accessible because their landlords did not require proof of employment, background checks, or security deposits from prospective tenants, as typically required in the formal rental housing market. Such informal housing arrangements were flexible, fitting the needs of newly arrived undocumented Chinese immigrants and allowing them to quickly adjust to their unstable situations, such as relocating for out-of-city or out-of-state jobs or moving back and forth in Los Angeles to process their legal paperwork at short notice.

Besides access to informal housing, there was also a high concentration of employment agencies, which further compelled *zouxian* people to settle in the Chinese ethnoburb. During our fieldwork, we identified around a dozen employment agencies near Fatty Ding's Plaza, each offering the latest listings of jobs both locally and across the country. Job seekers, regardless of immigration status, often joined *WeChat* chat groups managed by the agencies to receive job listings in real time. Yet, many of them still preferred in-person visits, hoping to be the first to seize the best job opportunity. Additionally, there were numerous Chinese-speaking law offices in Monterey Park and the surrounding areas providing accessible legal assistance to help *zouxian* people file for asylum and apply for work permits, offering language support and flexible payment plans unavailable to non-coethnic clients. Other ethnic businesses, including Chinese restaurants, grocery stores, pharmacies, used car dealers, as well as Chinese-language churches and other sociocultural institutions like the Herald Community Center and Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, further reinforced the appeal of SGV's Chinese ethnoburb.

Most *zouxian* people under study managed to leverage ethnic intermediaries in the Chinese ethnoburb, such as family motels, employment agencies, and law offices, to meet their immediate housing, employment, and legal needs. However, our in-depth interviews and participant observation reveal that their initial settlement in the SGV was not so much by choice but more by forced choice. For example, Mr. Chen, a 38-year-old, middle-class interviewee from Hubei, explained why his family settled in Monterey Park:

When we first arrived, like I said, it's our first stop in the U.S. Still dealing with Chinese people. There was no other way. Everything, such as food, housing, and work, was associated with Chinese people. So, after you get your work permit and you want to venture out [of the Chinese community], right? But when you don't speak the language, it's still the Chinese community you rely on.

Despite being drawn to SGV's Chinese ethnoburb, *zouxian* people, lacking pre-existing diasporic ties, were not embedded in the ethnic community. Instead, they leveraged their internet savviness and strong human capital to form new ties that would enable them to navigate restricted social rights, meeting their immediate housing, employment, and legal needs.

Aware of their exclusion from the formal housing market in Los Angeles due to their undocumented status and economic vulnerability, *zouxian* people relied on networked individualism to find useful housing information and resources. For example, some interviewees found rental listings through Chinese-language online platforms like *Red Note*, *Douyin*, *WeChat*, and *ChineselnLA.com*.⁵ Others turned to Fatty Ding's Plaza, a popular meeting point in Monterey Park, where they sought leads from coethnics, including fellow *zouxian* people, on available accommodations in nearby family motels. They also looked for unauthorized housing advertising posted on lampposts on main commercial streets in the ethnoburb. Through networked individualism, they accessed the contact information of coethnic landlords and secured short-term accommodations with a phone call or visit. However, *zouxian* people with pre-existing ties in the U.S. could secure housing with leads or arrangement from their relatives and friends. Although these pre-existing ties helped address their initial settlement needs, such as finding housing, opening bank accounts, or renting mailboxes, they could not help further,

such as securing a job, for a lack of resources or a lack of mutual interest and bounded solidarity.

Thus, most *zouxian* people relied on networked individualism to access employment opportunities. They turned to online platforms like *ChineselnLA.com* and *Huaren 168*⁶ to browse job listings and contact potential employers directly (Zhang 2025). For example, the abovementioned interviewee Mr. Chen found his warehouse job online. He explained that he and his wife avoided using employment agencies, not to save on referral fees, but out of a strong belief in personal autonomy:

We believed we had the ability to do so. It wasn't about avoiding the referral fee. We just felt capable enough to find work ourselves. We weren't desperate for a job.⁷ It wasn't about urgency. we simply relied on ourselves.

Zouxian people like him who emphasized personal autonomy actively networked in public and semi-public spaces in the ethnoburb, and many would hang out at Fatty Ding's Plaza, family motels, and/or employment agencies to seek employment opportunities. For example, Ms. Yang, an interviewee in her 50s from northeastern China, secured a live-in caretaker job in San Jose through a coethnic she met in her family motel in Monterey Park. *Zouxian* people also actively networked in the virtual space to crowdsource information about employment opportunities, work experiences, and exploitative coethnic employers. In this way, they transformed both physical and virtual spaces of social relations into spaces of networked individualism to mitigate employment precarity.

Zouxian people adopted similar strategies of networked individualism when navigating the complex and often opaque U.S. immigration system, particularly in seeking legal assistance for asylum applications, which were crucial for obtaining work permits first and permanent residency eventually. Many began looking for immigration lawyers or agents within days of arriving in the U.S., eager to secure the necessary documentation for authorized employment and asylum claims. Lacking access to pre-existing migrant networks, they relied on network individualism to assess the availability and credibility of legal assistance providers, also through online platforms like *Douyin*, *WeChat*, *ChineselnLA.com*, and *Huren 168*. In addition, they sought referrals from fellow *zouxian* people who had made the journey to the U.S. with them or before them, activating their newly formed social networks for this specialized support. For example, Mr. Zhang, a 38-year-old interviewee from Jiangsu, told us stories about how he met his travel companions during the border crossing process, how he built and maintained connections with them, and how he activated these weak ties later when he needed to find reliable legal assistance providers. Additionally, *zouxian* people actively networked with other coethnics in the ethnoburb and in the virtual space for relevant information. For those unable to afford the \$1,000 to \$1,500 initial payment typically required for retaining immigration lawyers, they used networked individualism to find affordable alternatives. Many turned to informal legal assistance providers or paralegals that they found through referrals or social media and paid about \$500 for filing an asylum application. In this way, *zouxian* people utilized networked individualism as a coping mechanism in accessing legal assistance that was otherwise difficult to obtain due to exclusion from established migrant networks and language barriers.

Besides relying on paid services through intermediaries, *zouxian* people used digital technologies to access free information and resources offered by NGOs within and

beyond the ethnoburb to meet their immediate needs. For example, Mr. Lin, a 33-year-old interviewee from Henan, used Google Map to locate an NGO in downtown Los Angeles that provided critical housing and healthcare support for his family upon arrival in the U.S. Similarly, when Ms. Luo, a 40-year-old interviewee from Guangdong, faced disputes with her coethnic landlord, she searched online and visited Chinese-language NGOs to obtain legal advice. We also observed that many *zouxian* people, facing unemployment and financial hardship, learnt from coethnics in the ethnoburb and in the virtual space about food pantries provided by the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation and other NGOs in the ethnoburb, which helped them alleviate food insecurity. Through networked individualism, *zouxian* people adeptly accessed information and resources provided by NGOs, strategically turning to specific organizations for targeted support that enabled them to navigate restricted social rights.

The limits of networked individualism

At first glance, it appears that networked individualism was an effective coping mechanism utilized by *zouxian* people to navigate restricted social rights. Our analysis clearly demonstrated that networked individualism produced valuable weak ties and bridging capital that enabled *zouxian* people to tap into the housing, labor, and legal service markets to address their immediate needs upon arrival in the U.S. However, this coping mechanism has its limits. For many *zouxian* people, it often led to overcrowded housing, low-wage jobs, and unreliable legal assistance, causing disappointment and emotional and physical distress and ultimately reinforcing their multi-layered precarities.

First, while networked individualism helped *zouxian* people find housing, it would not guarantee adequate living conditions. Existing research has consistently revealed that informal rental housing open to newly arrived Chinese immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, in New York and Los Angeles is often overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe, and many available rental units operate in legal gray zones or are outright illegal (Kwong 1997; Wang 2020). During our fieldwork in the SGV, we witnessed that a garage in a detached single-family house was converted into a room with eight beds for men, and a single bathroom and kitchen were shared by as many as twenty tenants. One interviewee told us that he had to relocate from a family motel after a fire caused by exposed wires. Privacy was nearly impossible in these shared living spaces. Many reported struggling to sleep well due to clashing schedules and constant background noise from snoring, videos, and chitchats. Hygiene was another major concern; some interviewees reported suffering from painful ant bites during the summer. Theft was also common. During our fieldwork, we heard repeated incidents of missing wallets, phones, and even personal items like underwear. We also observed that many interviewees had to constantly negotiate access to shared spaces, such as kitchen and bathroom. The relationship between landlord and tenants was often tense as well. Many landlords imposed strict rules on tenants regarding cooking, hygiene, and visitors. With little coethnic affinity beyond a shared language, these landlords treated their tenants as strangers in a purely monetary relationship.

Second, networked individualism would not ensure that *zouxian* people could access decent jobs offering fair earnings, job security, satisfactory working conditions, and pathways for upward mobility. While their strategies of using digital technologies to find work

appeared effective, the jobs they found were still largely defined by their undocumented status, which subjected all undocumented immigrants to precarity. Their jobs were often concentrated in low-skilled and labor-intensive sectors, such as construction, restaurant business, warehousing, agriculture, as well as personal services like massage therapy, nail care, and home care. For example, the aforementioned Ms. Yang worked as a live-in caretaker, earning \$120 per day. Her job involved not only the care of an elderly man with dementia but also his entire family, a role she described as emotionally and physically exhausting and isolating. While she desperately wanted to quit, she was unsure that her next job would be any better. Even when *zouxian* people worked for coethnic employers, they shared no bounded solidary and enforceable trust with their employers as generally found in ethnic enclave economies (Portes and Zhou 1992; Zhou 1992). Unlike older migrant groups where employers and employees share closely-knit community ties, the relationships within the *zouxian* network are often transactional. This means that while networked individualism helps them find jobs, it does not provide the communal protection or support that might be found in traditional migrant networks.

Third, while networked individualism helped *zouxian* people find legal assistance, it provided no guarantees of reliability or quality. Online lawyer commercials and referrals from coethnics were not always reliable and, in many cases, left *zouxian* people vulnerable to fraud and exploitation. For example, two interviewees told us that they found the same legal assistance provider on *WeChat* and that each paid a \$400 deposit, only to be ghosted afterward. In another case, an interviewee paid \$5,000 to an immigration lawyer recommended by his son's boss, but after two months of silence and repeated failed attempts to reach the lawyer by phone, he realized that the lawyer had likely disappeared with his money. These incidents not only resulted in financial loss and emotional distress but also delayed the processing of their applications for work permits and asylum. This further exacerbated their legal precarity and highlighted the risks of relying on informal, digitally-mediated networks for critical services, which operate without the social control mechanism of traditional migrant networks.

Constraints in social capital formation

The limitations of networked individualism in addressing *zouxian* people's housing, employment, and legal needs highlighted its constraints in the process of social capital formation. The social capital generated from far-flung, sparsely-knit, and loosely-bounded ties was fragmented, consisting mainly of weak ties with little embeddedness in the ethnic community and traditional migrant networks. While these weak ties could provide bridging capital, they lacked the same advantages of the ties commonly found in traditional migrant networks. These traditional networks, rooted in shared ethnic identity and systems of trust and reciprocity, provide both strong and weak ties with distinct benefits that a digitally-mediated network often cannot replicate, such as trusted sources of support, reliable help or referral without the fear of exploitation, mutual obligation, and emotional support.

Given that networked individualism prioritized personal autonomy and self-interest, many *zouxian* people had no intention to start their American life in the Chinese community. They saw SGV's Chinese ethnoburb, itself more diverse and less closely knit than

Chinatown, as a necessary transit hub. Their aspiration was to integrate into mainstream society as soon as they could. As a result, their interactions with coethnics in the ethnoburb and in the virtual space were mainly for practical purposes. For example, Mr. Sun, a 39-year-old interviewee from Shaanxi, shared that fellow *zouxian* people whom he met in a family motel were “practical.” They reached out to him, who had greater experience with bureaucratic and language barriers, only when they needed help:

They are very practical. If they can find someone else to replace me, someone who can help them with things like paying a traffic ticket or translating something, they will definitely not contact me again.

In other words, *zouxian* people had not maintained their newly formed ties over time but activated them only when specific needs arose. In some cases, their weak ties with coethnics were severed due to a failure to reciprocate favors or interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, although they relied on paid services from intermediaries, their relationships with these coethnic providers differed from those serving their *laoxiang* (compatriots from the same hometown). The newly formed networks of *zouxian* people – built through interactions with fellow *zouxian* people, intermediaries, and NGOs – were loosely-knit in essence, rather than being tightly knit into groups bonded by shared interests, such as pooling financial resources to fund ventures like starting a business that would be impossible for an individual. As a result, the social capital generated from these fragmented, weak ties was unlikely to be converted into ethnic resources, which were critical for upward mobility in the same way that traditional migrant networks provide. Furthermore, the social networks newly formed by *zouxian* people primarily consisted of other *zouxian* people or Chinese immigrants in similarly precarious conditions, a phenomenon known as “sociodemographic homophily” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, 429). Due to this homogeneity and a lack of multiplexity, their networks could not act as “a bridge to greater resources or socially advantageous contacts” that were crucial for their adaptation and upward mobility (Ryan 2011, 721). Limited English language proficiency and confinement to the Chinese ethnoburb further restricted *zouxian* people’s ability to network with non-coethnic members, both within and beyond the ethnoburb. While their networks formed through networked individualism seemed boundless, their extensive but shallow nature actually limited the amount, quality, and value of social capital they produced.

Additionally, many *zouxian* people were not only disinterested in but also disengaged with the ethnic community. This disengagement stemmed partly from their lack of strong ties to the pre-existing migrant networks and their aspiration to move out of the ethnoburb and integrate into mainstream society. This is a key point: their disengagement is both a deliberate choice and, in many cases, a forced response to their precarious situations. This choice, however, further exacerbated their double marginalization by the broader host society, where their minoritized and undocumented status limited their mobility prospects (Liu-Farrer 2008), and by their own ethnic community where they became “new strangers.”

Unlike earlier waves of undocumented Chinese immigrants who were tightly connected to and controlled by the ethnic community through traditional migrant networks, *zouxian* people typically practiced networked individualism. This practice often reduced their social relations with coethnic businesses and ethnic sociocultural institutions to

instrumental, self-interested transactional exchanges, leading to resentment and distrust. Mr. Zhong, a 26-year-old interviewee from Henan, expressed frustration that his former coethnic employer at a sushi restaurant showed little respect for him and other *zouxian* workers. He recounted that his employer questioned their loyalty and work ethic when they talked about Coach Fatty Ding, an alleged *zouxian* person who became a well-known whistleblower. The social media influencer earned a contested reputation within the ethnic community and on social media platforms for reporting his coethnic employers' labor rights violations to the U.S. Department of Labor. Mr. Zhong said:

He'd also say things [to me] like, "You came here illegally and still have all these demands, always reporting the boss." I'd talk back to him, "It's not me who wants to report you. It's you who brings it up." I was just saying he [Coach Fatty Ding] was reporting the boss, not me. But then he twisted it, saying I was threatening him and wanted to report him.

During our informal talks with coethnic employers, some expressed resentment toward *zouxian* people, describing them as "too picky" about jobs, lacking a strong work ethic, or being ungrateful for job opportunities provided to them. Mr. Xie, a construction contractor in his 60s, was critical about Coach Fatty Ding and *zouxian* people. He said:

He [Coach Fatty Ding] is only chasing online traffic and exploiting legal loopholes. People like him are merely opportunists who have ruined opportunities for those coming after them. As a result, [coethnic] employers are now hesitant to hire *zouxian* people. In the past, hiring workers without work permits was an unspoken norm. Both parties benefited: employers paid lower wages, and workers had jobs. But now, this mutual agreement has been disrupted ... , and many *zouxian* people are opportunists.

As a result, coethnic employers like Mr. Xie became wary and reluctant to hire coethnic workers without work permits, making it more difficult for recent arrivals to obtain jobs. This concern was evidenced by the increased demand for workers with work permits in job listings posted by employment agencies during our fieldwork. However, coethnic employers' concern was not baseless. Many *zouxian* people under study expressed no hesitation in reporting suspected instances of labor rights violations, such as excessive working hours, wage theft, and wrongful termination by coethnic employers. In this case, self-interest rather than bounded solidarity and enforceable trust was the main driver of their claims-making.

While resisting and reporting exploitative coethnic employers demonstrated *zouxian* people's awareness and willingness to improve their working conditions, such actions risked marginalization by the very institutions that their predecessors have relied on for upward mobility. Undocumented Chinese immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s leveraged established migrant networks that were highly embedded in both the ethnic community and their hometown to achieve social mobility through employment and self-employment in ethnic enclave economies (e.g. entrepreneurship in fast-food restaurant business in Chinatown and beyond) or through transnationalism (e.g. remittances for collective consumption in hometowns) (Liang 2023; Zhou and Li 2016, 2018). By contrast, *zouxian* people were alienated as "new strangers" in their ethnic community. This marginalization left them with uncertain future mobility prospects, as they lacked the social support from their own community that has been proven critical for upward mobility in ethnic enclave economies. Furthermore, they lacked the physical space for social status expression and compensation that a cohesive hometown network provides. Many have instead turned to

social media as a platform for self-expression. However, as semi-public spaces, these platforms often elicit mixed reactions, including hate speech and judgmental remarks. For instance, Mr. Zhong lamented that “when I post something [about my life in the U.S. on *Douyin*], some people come and troll me. It feels a bit like populism.”

Finally, networked individualism limited *zouxian* people’s ability to engage in collective action and claims-making. Relying on fragmented, weak ties, they depended on short-term, ad-hoc help instead of coordinated efforts for long-term policy change. Without concrete labor organizing or rights-based advocacy plans, their hopes for improved conditions remained just hopes. Ultimately, this coping mechanism, while useful for immediate survival, hindered the community-building needed to challenge and dismantle structural barriers.

Conclusion

Based on our in-depth interviews and participant observation in a Chinese ethnoburb in Los Angeles, we found that post-COVID-19 undocumented Chinese immigrants, or *zouxian* people, used network individualism to navigate restricted social rights in the U.S. Lacking connections to pre-existing ethnic migrant networks, they leveraged online platforms to find housing, employment, and legal assistance. Our findings reveal a distinct paradox: while networked individualism eased *zouxian* people’s immediate needs, it simultaneously reinforced their disengagement from both their ethnic community and the wider host society, leading to double marginalization. Unlike earlier immigrant waves that emphasized collective interests and community-building, *zouxian* people prioritized self-interest. This shift has significant trade-offs, exacerbating their double marginalization and potentially hindering their social mobility in the long run. We suggest that future research examine the long-term trajectories of *zouxian* people to understand how their social networks evolve over time. Such studies could assess whether networked individualism persists as their primary coping mechanism and whether individual claims-making might evolve into collective advocacy to address systemic inequalities.

Notes

1. The *zouxian* phenomenon caught public attention and was widely reported in mainstream media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *CNN*.
2. In fiscal years (FY), the data only included Chinese nationals who were apprehended at the southwestern border by the U.S. Border Patrol.
3. Initial outreach was conducted through active participation at key sites of the everyday life of *zouxian* people (see also Zheng and Zhou [forthcoming](#)). To build trust and rapport, the research team employed transparent communication of research purposes and obtained informed consent from all research participants. All names of our interviewees are in pseudonyms.
4. 1 USD = 7.2 RMB in 2023–24.
5. A Chinese-language information-sharing online platform that provides a wide range of life-related content in Los Angeles, including classifieds for housing, jobs, and business reviews. <https://www.chineseinla.com/> (access August 23, 2025).
6. Another Chinese-language online platform for diasporic Chinese communities. <https://www.us168168.com/> (access August 23, 2025).

7. Mr Chen was a middle-class immigrant with strong financial capital and thus he was not desperately looking for a job while his working-class counterparts who relied on their limited savings to survive initial immigrant disadvantages experienced greater financial pressure when they could not find a job upon arrival.

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Author contributions

The authors share equal contributions to the study.

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Statement of ethics

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Law at Jiangnan University (Project identification code: 20230501) as well as the Graduiertenkolleg "Authority and Trust" at Universität Heidelberg (Project identification code: GRK 2244/2).

Data availability

The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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