Introduction

According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, there were an estimated 286 million rural migrant workers, such as people who have a rural household registration but are employed in an urban workplace, in China in 2020. Amongst these migrant workers, around 22.7% of them were young people aged 16 to 30 years old (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). For young people, friends are a crucial influence as they provide support for each other during their transitional phases of moving beyond families to start their own more independent lives (Niland et al., 2015). Migrants who are in employments that are associated with the risks of precarity and exploitation have particular needs for friendship. This article concerns one such example: Chinese young adults who have moved from rural areas to work in the informal entertainment economy of China's cities where they have no recourse to social security and are far from their family and kin who previously were their main sources of support. The study of the friendships of migrant workers can contribute to understanding the complementarity of different types of personal relationships and the ways in which friendships take on particular significance in different contexts and at particular life stages (Allan and Adams, 2007, Jamieson, 2005).

In existing studies about Chinese migrant workers' friendships, some literature tends to assume that migrant workers cannot build and maintain meaningful friendships because they are a hyper-mobile group, who are constantly changing jobs or moving from one place to another (Wang and Nehring, 2014; Xiang, 2021). While such ways of living do pose challenges to migrant workers' friendships, it is too simplistic to assume that hyper-mobility and friendship-building are mutually incompatible. There are implicit assumptions about what 'meaningful' friendships are or should be, that are underlying these assertions, which further points to the importance of unpacking the meaning of friendships from migrant workers' own points of view. In addition, some existing studies did unpack the instrumental role played by friends in terms of sharing job opportunities and contributing to migrant workers' emotional well-being and the sense of belonging in the new cities (e.g., Wen and Hanley, 2015; Seeberg and Luo, 2018). However, most of the existing China-based studies about migrant workers' friendships do not view friends and friendships as topics that are worthy of study in their own right but treat them as a subtopic of migrant workers' social networks and capabilities; furthermore, in some cases, friendships and networks are mixed up without a discussion about the similarities and differences between these two terms. Consequently, the diversity and complexity of friendships and the challenges or even risks experienced by migrant workers in the process of building up and maintaining friendships are not discussed thoroughly. Therefore, inspired by Allan and Adams' (1998) sociological contributions to friendship studies, this article aims to contribute to

closing gaps in existing literature by providing insights into young migrant workers' everyday experiences of friendships, based on an ethnographic project in Yunnan Province, Southwest China.

This article's conceptual framework was formed by sociological theories of friendship studies offered by Adams and Allen (1998) and Pahl and Spencer (2004). Adams and Allen (1998) indicate the importance of understanding the significance of friendships by placing friendships in multileveled contexts to look at the entirety of a person's personal environment (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status), social network, communities and subcultures within which they are involved, and the social structures that shape the forms of their personal relationships. Pahl and Spencer (2004) demonstrate the diverse, complex and multi-stranded nature of friendships. Although sociologists' open attitude of leaving it to the researched people to define their friendships by themselves has been criticised as one of the reasons that cause methodological challenges to the development of friendship studies (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Ryle, 2015), sociologists' 'openness' in defining 'friendship' is not a shortcoming but an advantage when exploring friendships in a group of research subjects' everyday lives in relatively unexplored contexts. Therefore, since one of the main purposes of this article is to indicate the contextualised, dynamic, and diverse meanings of friendships understood by young migrant workers, in this introduction section, we are not going to provide a definition of friendship. Nevertheless, there is a need to specify that, in this article, 'friends' and 'friendship' are used in presented data when participants name them as such. Thus, guided by existing literature and this project's findings, to unpack friendships between young Chinese migrant workers, this article places specific attention on the friendships' 'multistranded' nature (Pahl and Spencer, 2004) and diverse patterns of friendships experienced by young Chinese migrant workers in specific contexts.

Friendship as a diverse, complex and multistranded relationship

When discussing friendship, the complexity and diversity of friendships' patterns, meanings, and practices have been key focuses of sociological friendship studies. Adams and Allan (1998) argue that the contexts to locate friendship are multileveled and interconnected, including 'personal environment level', 'network level', 'community or subcultural level', and 'societal level'. Changes of these multileveled contexts could shape people's understandings and experiences of friendships. For example, criteria used to identify friends and friendship could vary, which means people may be named as 'friends' in some situations but as 'mates' in other settings. Furthermore, when a person names a group of people as their friends, their expectations toward each friend could be diverse. Pahl and Spencer (2004: 207) note that some friendships are based on just one main form of interaction, whereas others are 'more complex and multistranded' because of the involvement of the exchange of personal confidences, emotional support, common interests, and companionship. In this case,

friendship is not a homogeneous concept; it can be categorised into different types, such as intimate friendship, instrumental friendship, and sociable friendship, in different situations (Wolf, 1966, 2001; Badhwar, 1993; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Tang, 2010). In existing discussions about the diversity, complexity, and dynamic conversion of friendship patterns, the close connection between the emotional and instrumental aspects of friendship has increasingly attracted scholars' attention.

The importance of providing friends emotional support, such as 'being there' for friends in their difficult times, is one of the commonly agreed natures of friendship, especially intimate friendship (Brownlie, 2011, 2014; Greco et al., 2015). For different people in different situations, forms of providing emotional support and the features that are counted as emotional support could be diverse (Brownlie, 2014). For example, for some people, 'being there' to provide intimate others, such as friends, emotional support does not have to require physical presence; however, having friends around physically to provide emotional support through sympathetic talking and listening, joyful play, bodily contact (e.g., holding hands and hugging) in difficult times is highly valued by some other people, such as residential children, who are living in a boarding school away from family support (Zhu, 2019). While existing literature on migrants' friendships, especially those which focus on professional and elite migrants, tend to put more emphasis on the importance of emotional support in friendships (e.g., Walsh, 2009; Ryan, 2015), emotional support is not the only valued element in friendship. Instrumental benefits associated with friendships, such as friendship's function of extending social networks, thus accessing resources for economic and social gain (e.g., Armytage, 2015), are often emphasised in both childhood and adulthood friendships. For example, in the Chinese context, idioms like '*duo ge pengyou, duo tiao lu*' (one more friend means one more pathway) and '*pengyou duo le, lu hao zou*' (the journey will be easier when you have many friends) highlight friendships' function of benefiting a person's situation. Therefore, instrumental benefits are often also valued in friendships in addition to the emotional ones. For people in vulnerable situations, friendship's instrumental function of providing daily support is particularly valued. Highlighting the importance of friendship's instrumental functions of providing help is commonly noticed in global studies with children and young people, especially those in vulnerable and unstable situations, such as street children (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010), children in care (Roesch-Marsh and Emond, 2021), young carer (Barry, 2011), and young migrants (Reynolds, 2007), especially young migrant workers (Malyutina, 2018). For these children and young people, friendship could be valued and used as sources of help, security and survival (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010, p.445). But it is important to notice that as a complex and dynamic interpersonal relationship, both instrumental aspects and emotional aspects do exist in intimate friendship and instrumental friendship respectively and could promote the change of friendship. For example, in the management of interpersonal relationships

(*guanxi*), including friendships, in the Chinese context, mutually giving help and gaining help in return could ensure Chinese people a sense that such relationships are sensible and sincere (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010; Qi, 2013). Therefore, it is common to notice that in the process of helping friends in need, the relationship between friends involved might be strengthened with a stronger emotional bond (Zhu, 2021). Over time, an instrumental-oriented friendship might be 'upgraded' to a more intimate friendship.

In China, as a 'relation-centered' society (Tsui & Farh, 1997, p. 61), the importance of building up wide friendship networks is commonly emphasised in the society and highlighted since child education (Zhu, 2020). For example, '*zaijia kao fumu, chumen kao pengyou*' (relying on parents at home but relying on friends outside the home) is a commonly used idiom used to express the importance of friendships when people move beyond families to start a more independent life. Therefore, once they move to cities, young Chinese migrant workers commonly show a strong desire to befriend others with similar backgrounds with the aim to find themselves a community to rely on (Yang, 2008). However, there is a lack of studies which systematically unpack young migrant workers' friendships in China (see exception: Yang, 2008), which is also a highly vulnerable and marginalised group who tend to work and live under precarious conditions as extensively demonstrated by literature (e.g., Pun, 2005; Mao, 2021). Adding the fact that the long-standing *hukou* system[1] in China has continued to exclude trans-local migrants from accessing welfare in urban areas (Dong and Goodburn, 2020; Lin and Mao, 2022), migrants are often pushed to resort to informal means, such as families and friends, to seek support. While the ways families become important sources of care have been convincingly elaborated (e.g., Peng, 2021), the roles of friends as sources of care and support have been less discussed, which is a significant gap this article aims to fill. Furthermore, as indicated in existing studies with young migrant workers about the instrumental benefits of friendships, a particular focus has been placed on the positive aspect of friendship's instrumental aspect, such as finding job opportunities, a sense of belonging, and emotional support (Reynolds, 2007; Yang, 2008; Malyutina, 2018). However, the risks associated with the instrumental aspect of friendship have not been discussed carefully. In fact, although friendship is normally constructed as a positive, reliable, and intimate interpersonal relationship, it also has its 'dark side'. For example, it is often recognised that, apart from the egoistic emphasis on the instrumental benefits offered by friends, sincere effect and altruistic values are also highlighted. In the Chinese context, '*yi qi*', which refers to a spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice and is treated as an important code for

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[1] Established in 1958, hukou is the household registration system that divides the population into "rural" and "urban" populations, and registers people according to their place of birth. Its initial intention is to control migration, yet its impact is much more profound than this as hukou has become an integral part of China's economic and political system, directly linked with social stratification.

brotherhood, and '*wei pengyou liang lei cha dao*' (for friends, [I] could tolerate knifes piercing both sides) are used to describe a sincere determination of sacrificing for friends. Although such a sense of being able to sacrifice oneself for friendship could contribute to the emotional attachment between friends, such a sense of friendship could indeed in some cases also causes people burdens (e.g., emotional and financial burdens). Furthermore, such 'dark side' is often linked with a failure of dealing with equality, justice, and reciprocity in friendships (Lynch, 2015). For example, unbalanced power relations between friends could put the ones, who are in a relatively powerless status, at risk of being exploited by their 'powerful' friends in the name of doing them favours (Zhu, 2021 and forthcoming).

Although friendship is such a complex and important interpersonal relationship in people's everyday personal lives, young Chinese migrant workers' understandings of friendship and experiences of the diversity and complexity of friendships have not been unpacked systematically in the existing literature. It is necessary to bridge the gap to have a better understanding of these young Chinese migrant workers' personal lives and relationships with significant others, in this case 'friends', in their highly mobile life.

Methods

This article builds upon six months of ethnographic fieldwork that Jingyu conducted in a small-scale city—Green City[2]— in Yunnan Province, Southwest China, which focuses on a group of ethnic performers, i.e., rural-urban migrants who perform ethnic songs and dances at restaurants and tourist sites. The purpose of the study, which incorporates broader scopes than the present article, is to gain an in-depth understanding of the work and migration experiences of ethnic performers, as they encounter different forms of bordering during everyday work, most notably in relation to the rural-urban divide, ethnicity, and gender (Mao, 2020). This study also seeks to understand how broader social inequalities have an impact on the most intimate and personal spheres of migrant performers' lives, including their understanding and practices of friendship, among other things. During the period of October 2016 to April 2017, Jingyu undertook participant observation in three field sites: Waterfall Restaurant, Tea Park and Forest Park (all pseudonyms). She conducted 45 in-depth interviews with performers within these three sites, as well as 15 in-depth interviews with service workers outside of these sites. Of the informants, 33 were women, and 27 of them were men. Most of the informants were young people aged between 16 to 30 years old, who make up 75% of the interviewees. Consistent with existing literature, most informants in this study undertake informal and precarious work, which is manifested by the lack of formal employment contracts and the exclusion from state

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[2] Out of anonymity concerns, we use the pseudonym of 'Green City' to refer to the city.

and union protection (Swider, 2017). Borrowing Guy Standing's concept of the 'precariat'—a combination of precarious living and the proletariat—migrant workers are habitualised into '*expecting* a life of unstable labour and unstable living' (Standing, 2014: 1, emphasis original). They are also a highly mobile group, as they tend to use job quitting and job changing as a strategy to respond to the highly exploitative and unequal working conditions (Xiang, 2021). Therefore, the ways in which precarity and high mobility provide a unique context to situate young migrant workers' friendship understanding and practices need to be further unpacked. As the work experiences of ethnic performers are discussed in-depth elsewhere (see Mao, 2020; Mao, 2021), this article focuses on the shared experience of informants as rural-urban migrants, and how their migration and work situations provide a unique context for their understandings and practices of friendship. Meanwhile, since ethnicity in this context is more fluid and complex than commonly assumed (Mao, forthcoming), the ways ethnicity shape migrant performers' friendships deserve another article, therefore is not addressed here.

At Waterfall Restaurant, Jingyu dressed in the same costumes and worked together with the informants as a waitress/performer, as it was the most reasonable option to justify the researcher's presence in the semi-private settings of the individual compartments of the restaurant. At the other two sites, where working together with informants was not possible, the researcher shadowed informants' work by being at their workplace every day. 'Being there' becomes one of the most important ways for the researcher to build rapport with the informants, which turned out to be crucial, especially considering the initial fieldwork challenges. To be more specific, shaped by the perceived social distance between the urban-origin, middle-class researcher and rural-origin, working-class informants, the researcher was referred to as 'the college girl' by her informants, and there were rumours spreading about how she allegedly arrived at the restaurant in a Mercedes. Such rumours in the field are revealing in showing how the researcher was perceived by informants in certain ways (Murphy, 1985), which is deeply shaped by the social positionalities of gender, class, and rural-urban divide. Such perceived social distance posed great challenges to the fieldwork, as initially many informants found it difficult to trust and open up to the researcher. Thus, building friendships or friend-like relationships with informants was imperative. Meanwhile, the researcher also had ambivalent feelings about the complexity of friendships in the field and the processes of befriending informants, which itself is a controversial topic that has attracted considerable debates and reflections (see Hendry, 1992; Taylor, 2011). Having benefited from feminist ethnographic discussions on this topic, the researcher takes the standpoint that it is important to build empathetic relationships with informants, and there would be considerable personal involvement and emotional attachment in the field (Coffey, 1999). Nevertheless, one should be cautious about the ethically challenging nature of

befriending informants, and be reflexive about how friendships in the field could have a profound impact on the ways the ethnographer sees and interprets ethnographic encounters (Taylor, 2011). How to balance involvement with distance is an especially important theme to consider in the context of doing research in China where '*guanxi*' (relationships) are highly valued and emphasised (Svensson, 2006). While trying to build good relationships with informants, the researcher was cautious about making her research intention clear to all informants at the very beginning of the fieldwork, so that they could make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in the research. While appreciating some informants' friendships and friendly help, the researcher also made sure her role would not become confusing for informants. For example, she proposed to informants that apart from the right to withdraw from the research/interview at any time without any costs, informants could also say things to her 'off the record', so that certain information could be considered as shared between friends without becoming part of the research data. In general, apart from genuinely caring about informants emotionally, the action to build friend-like relationships with informants also has its instrumental purposes. This points to the mutually constitutive relationships between the instrumental and emotional aspects of friendships, which are explored more thoroughly in the following sections.

Valuing the instrumental aspects of friendship in the context of precarity

The context of precarious work and living conditions leads young migrant workers to highly value the roles of friends as important sources of care and support, among which the help from friends is highly emphasised. Such help includes various aspects, such as instrumental support (including financial support) and emotional support, that matter in these young migrant workers' everyday lives. Through Qiong recounting her experiences, one can get a sense of the various sorts of help expected and experienced by these migrant workers in friendships:

> *I worked there for ten days or so, and I don't think I'm a good fit. They [the managers] probably felt the same way, so they came to ask me to quit…Oh, that was such a dark time for me! Really! My money just got stolen, and I just lost my job… To make things worse, I didn't have any money on me. It's lucky that I still have my friend, with whom we used to work together at A hotel. She also came from Ximen, so she treated me really well. She often asked me to eat at her place—the small flat that she and her boyfriend were renting at that time. They cooked, and invited me to eat. She also lent me money. She said: 'don't worry about it, just take the money first. Don't worry about paying me back until you find your next job.' She also accompanied me to find jobs whenever she was not working.*

Notably, such help is particularly placed in 'difficult' situations, which refer to hardship in everyday life, such as being sick or unemployed, as a crucial criterion of friendship. For example, Liang, said:

> *...when you have something urgent, [real] friends are those who can help you out. When everything goes on smoothly, and people just came to enjoy the time with you, I don't think they are real friends. They are just acquaintances who hang out with you.*

For Liang, one can draw a boundary between 'real friends' and 'acquaintances' by judging whether or not they are willing to help him when he is in need. When emphasising the importance of relying on friends' usefulness in their life as migrant workers, being away from family support was commonly mentioned by these informants, which strongly echoes Jamieson's (2005) argument that the role of friendship could be more significant when the family is absent. For example, Baolong's comment is representative:

> *Co-workers and friends are very important to me. If...if it wasn't a big problem, I wouldn't contact my family back home easily. But small problems, you can't always solve them yourself. You have to rely on friends.*

Subsequently, Baolong used 'being sick' and 'not having money' as examples of 'problems' that were not 'big problems' for which contacting family was necessary, but which nevertheless could not always be solved by himself alone. Echoing Baolong, many other informants also felt that it is not always possible or desirable to turn to help from families back home. For example, when sharing her experience of losing her job and having her money stolen, Qiong stated: '*I didn't want to tell my mom [about my difficulties], as I don't want my families to worry about me, about how I was alone in a new place*'. Amongst these migrant workers, not sharing bad news is an important way for migrants to emotionally care for their families from a distance (Baldassar, 2007). Therefore, friends who are physically 'there' and who can provide instant and timely help, become an important source of support for many migrant workers. Furthermore, illness, unemployment, and financial hardship were the three most frequently mentioned examples of difficulties in everyday life that need friends' support. In such hard situations, the multistranded nature of expectations towards help from friends is prominent because one can be emotionally, physically, and financially fragile or 'helpless' simultaneously. In such situations, the importance of having friends being there 'physically' for each other is highlighted by informants (see also Zhu, 2020), as they could have the expectations of gaining practical assistance from friends. For example, as previously shown in Qiong's case, a friend's practical assistance, such as cooking for her and accompanying her to find jobs, was sincerely appreciated by the informant. Another migrant worker, Zhang also shared the importance of friends' multistranded help in hardship by sharing an example of being ill:

Once I got into surgery for a kidney stone. My friends visited me at the hospital, and they gave my parents 1000 yuan.[3] It really warmed my heart that they did that! I will willingly give the same amount of money to my friends if one of them is sick.

Being ill is often a very distressing time for migrant workers, as too often they find it 'too costly to be ill' (Hong, etc., 2006). They tend to use all kinds of ways to avoid going to the hospital, as the expensive medical bills and the inability to access medical insurance as non-locals would easily add to their financial vulnerability. Therefore, friends' financial support is crucial in such times. In this and similar situations, friends' help is not only highlighted for its usefulness in terms of contributing to survival in the city as migrant workers away from family support but also valued for affection and morality that showed through in such support. For example, Zhang's remarks also highlight the closely intertwining aspects of friendship's instrumental and emotional aspects, when he described how friends' hospital visits and monetary support have 'warmed his heart'. Similarly, in the previously discussed case of Qiong, help from her friend has greatly eased her emotional distress. This points to how the instrumental aspects of friendship, such as help and care, often intertwine with the emotional aspects of friendship, in which friends provide emotional support to each other (Haseldine, 2011; Qi, 2013).

Further examining Zhang and Qiong's stories and similar experiences and concerns regarding health conditions, employment stability, and financial security shared by other informants, it is prominent that precarity has become an important context to shape the understanding and practices of friendship among migrant workers. The migrant workers examined here were all in the service sector, which is generally informal and precarious in China (Chan, Florence and Qiu, 2021). For example, Qiong worked at a Karaoke bar as a waitress before losing her first job. She, and most other informants in this research worked informally without signing any formal labour contracts. This is against Chinese Labour Law, but nevertheless is a common practice in many service sectors (Friedman and Lee, 2010). Therefore, they could easily lose a job whenever the manager is not happy, putting them in a dire situation and desperately in need of help. However, help and resources from official channels are scarce. As social security is largely shaped by one's household registration status in China, rural migrants who do not hold urban and local households are not entitled to many social benefits which are only available for local people with local household registration. For example, social protection such as unemployment benefits is out of reach for many migrant workers like Qiong, no matter how long they have stayed in the cities or have worked for the same employer. Incidents like things being stolen could easily put one in a desperate situation without effective social protective mechanisms.

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[3] At the time of the fieldwork, many of the informants received monthly wages of around 2000 yuan.

Hence, it is not surprising that monetary support becomes a stand out example of help between friends.

In sum, although the fact that friendship has both instrumental and emotional aspects is by no means a new observation and has been pointed out by previous literature (i.e., Lynch, 2015), the case of migrant performers highlights even more the ways these two aspects of friendship are mutually constitutive and intertwining. Especially in the context of precarious work and living conditions, friends' instrumental support and help often become a great source of emotional support, as they soothe one's anxiety, warm one's heart, and provide one a sense of security that one has places to turn for help if things go wrong. Previous literature sometimes tends to emphasise the emotional aspects of friendship, with subtle 'elitist' assumptions about friendship that it should be primarily based on emotional caring and emotional disclosure (e.g., Giddens, 2013). Our informants' experiences challenge such over-prioritisation of emotional disclosure in defining friendship, demonstrating how mutual help and being there physically to care for each other is at the heart of their friendship practices, while true friends are not necessarily defined through the ability to be emotionally close. 'Helping friends' is used by young migrant workers as a strategy to maintain friend networks and prepare potential instrumental sources to cope with difficulties at present and in the future. Further, the moral sense of helping friends is particularly strong among migrant workers due to their shared precarious circumstances as migrant workers. This sometimes as will be explained in the next section adds more risk and uncertainty to their practices of friendship in the context of high mobility.

Friendship in the context of high mobility: risk, burden, and the moral sense of helping friends

In the Chinese context, the exchange of favours and reciprocity plays a significant role in relationships, especially friendships (Mullis, 2008; Qi, 2013). Such 'reciprocity' is valued because of its instrumental contribution to the benefits of each party involved in the relationship by ensuring 'each friend contributes something to the relationship and that each be benefited by that contribution' (Mullis, 2008, p. 39). Because of the high level of interdependency in precarity and the moral sense of looking after each other as friends, the importance of 'reciprocity' was particularly emphasised by these young migrant workers. Informants in this research live a highly mobile life, as they move frequently between jobs or travel to new places to take up different jobs. This situation does pose certain challenges for them to build and maintain friendships, as asserted by others (e.g. Wang and Nehring, 2014; Xiang, 2021). However, their highly mobile living context is actually sustained by the help and support from friends, as demonstrated by the previous section. The shared positionality as migrant workers enabled informants to have a moral sense of helping and supporting each other,

especially the ones that have been identified as 'in-group members' (*zijiren*) (e.g., friends) of the same 'collective' (*jiti*) (e.g., friendship group) (Zhu, 2021). Meanwhile, their highly mobile lifestyle also means that they need to give friendship commitments in an unstable environment. Such precarity and a high expectation of providing instrumental support reciprocally to friends could lead to risks, especially financial risks, and emotional burdens.

It has been empirically proven that it is difficult for migrant workers to form friendships with local natives, out of reasons such as the social marginalisation and exclusion that many migrants have experienced (Li and Tong, 2020). It could also be explained by the concept of 'cultural homophily', as research has shown that people with high similarity of cultural attributes tend to become friends (Barnett and Benefield, 2017). In this research, only three out of sixty informants have reported that they have managed to become friends with local natives. As emerged from most informants' narratives, shared identities play a significant role in the process of making friends. In many instances, such as in Qiong's case, friends were the ones from the same native place. The ways that native place (*tongxiang*) association shapes migrant workers' networks and friendships have been well-established (Pun, 2005; Smart, 2020). In China, someone from the same native place is particularly important in the formation of friendship, especially when people move to a different community from their original one (Kjellgren, 2006), as people have a stronger inclination or even a moral sense of responsibility to help *tongxiang* (Barbalet, 2021). Apart from hometown belonging, other shared identities, such as 'migrant worker'(*dagonger*) and 'from rural origins', also provide a common ground for friendships to emerge. For instance, Yinyin shared her story of befriending Juan:

> *It's a funny story [how I got to know Juan]. After I lost my job as a cleaner, I stayed at home and cooked for my husband for nearly half a month. We lived in A street, so I often wander around the job advertisement board nearby when I go shopping for food, wishing to find a job. At that time Juan was also looking for a job [near the job advertisement board]. That's how I met her…She said she can't find a suitable job, I said me as well…She invited me for a meal at her place, and we talked about so much stuff! Turns out we have so much in common, and we both share the same last name 'Li'…Later she called and introduced me to this job [at Waterfall Restaurant] …Now we are very close friends, as we work side by side and share everything with each other.*

The fact that Yinyin and Juan were both migrant workers looking for a job became the common ground for them to relate to each other. Many informants similarly mentioned how they find it easier to become friends with others who are also migrant workers. Indeed, people tend to become friends with those who are in similar social and economic locations, and friendship also plays an important role in shaping people's identity (Allan, 1998). By becoming friends with those in similar positions, friendship, in turn, helps people to 'define themselves as someone who does occupy a particular location' (Allan, 1998: 694). In addition, Yinyin and Juan's story demonstrates how their

relationships transformed from acquaintances to close friends, proving that acquaintance *guanxi* (relationship) and friendship *guanxi* are different stages of relationship formation rather than different categories of relationships (Barbalet, 2021). In Yinyin's narrative, providing each other with reciprocal help, such as sharing job information, to survive in precarity as migrant workers is a prominent part of their friendship.

Although help and a strong sense of caring for friends is common among migrant workers and benefits some migrant workers, such as in Yinyin's case and in previously discussed informants' stories, there are also risks in relation to friendships, especially when these migrant workers need to give friendship commitments in an unstable environment. For example, an informant, Shan, disclosed that her motorcycle was stolen by a co-worker she regarded as a 'friend' in Waterfall Restaurant. Since borrowing things is common among friends, she did not think twice before lending her motorcycle to a friend who claimed that he needs to run some errands at the other end of the city. However, that person had since disappeared and never came back again. Shan could not reach him as her contact was blocked by him. Another incident occurred as informant Mi was asked to provide her ID card for her friend to register for a new phone. She did what was asked out of support for the friend. However, later she found out that she was in debt because of this, as her friend just vanished while leaving the debt of a new phone registered under Mi's name, which legally required Mi to pay for the upcoming bills.

Apart from listening to informants' narratives about the important role of help in friendships, the exchange of help or favours between friends was frequently observed in the field. Consistent with interview data, financial support was extremely important and greatly valued among friends. Lending money was a common practice among friends and co-workers at Waterfall Restaurant. Since workers' wages sometimes were not paid on time, it was common to rely on borrowed money from friends to get through these difficult days until the payday.

While hypermobility does not mean that migrants cannot form meaningful social relationships like friendships, it does provide a different context to situate migrant workers' friendships. Many young migrants do change jobs very frequently, often as a passive way to resist the highly exploitative work regime that they find themselves in. This also means that they face more risks when giving friendship commitment in such an unstable context, Shan and Mi's stories are clear examples of such risks. While reflecting on their somewhat negative experiences of helping friends, both Shan and Mi mentioned the emotional burden which makes it extremely difficult to not respond to a friend's request for help. Jingyu was able to gain a better understanding of informants' struggles due to related fieldwork experiences. When in the field, Jingyu has been asked by some close informants to lend

them money. It felt like a 'friendship test' for her, and it was important for her to show the willingness to help. When being asked to lend money, the researcher felt a sense of moral obligation, and a fear of letting friends/informants down, or even risking breaking good relationships if she refuses to do as expected. Such concern about the maintenance of friendship sometimes can become an emotionally burdening experience for her, which also led her to greater empathy and emotional resonance with her informants (Davison, 2004), who also experience the burden of moral obligations toward friends.

The 'dark side' of networks can have a negative impact on its successful members as there could be a sense of obligation and the pressure to follow the implicit network norms (Qi 2002). Similarly, in this case, a strong sense of obligation to always be ready to help each other became an implicit norm that shapes the friendship networks of young migrant workers. Other than fearing that refusal to help might lead to friendship breakdown, many migrant workers also need to think about the future implications of refusing friends' requests for help, as they may need to count on their friends when they encounter future difficulties, especially when official support channels (e.g., welfare systems) are not available. Despite all these risks and uncertainties, migrant workers' precarious situation compels them to still hold on to such a community that emphasises mutual help and reciprocity. It means that they cannot just walk away, or easily decide not to provide help to friends, as they also count on the help and support from their friends in many situations. This sometimes put them between a rock and a hard place, as they need to take full responsibility for the emotional burden and potential losses when giving a friendship commitment in a risky and uncertain context, yet it is difficult to judge how much commitment is appropriate. The context of high mobility and precarity makes meaningful friendships invaluable yet burdensome and potentially risky at the same time.

Conclusion:

This article unpacks friendships among Chinese young migrant workers to understand friendships' 'multistranded' nature and diverse patterns of friendships experienced by informants in their precarious and highly mobile lives. Concurring with Adams and Allan (1998)'s powerful call to 'place friendship in context', this article recognises how precarity and migration have become important contexts for young migrant workers' friendship practices in Southwest China. Being hyper-mobile does not necessarily mean that migrants were 'suspended' from different types of meaningful social relationships, including friendships, as stated by Xiang (2021); nor does it mean that migrants become dis-embedded from their community networks and therefore become autonomous individuals who need to deal with their problems on their own (Yan, 2003). In fact, migrant workers' hyper mobility in times of precarious living is sustained exactly because of meaningful social connections like friendship, which extends care and support beyond the family. Rather than seeing mobility and

precarity as a hindrance to migrant workers' friendships, it is better to see them as a structural context (Adams and Allan, 1998) where migrant workers' friendships are situated and deeply influenced. To be more specific, migrant workers' precarious work and living status mean that they put a lot of emphasis on the instrumental aspect of friendship, including help and care for one's friends, which was only strengthened in the context of migration. The ways families back home shoulder the social reproduction responsibilities when social welfare is lacking has been evidently examined (Nguyen and Locke, 2014), however, friendships sometimes also play similar roles of social security, which was less researched. This article also explores how migrant workers' moral sense of helping friends are also shaped by their shared positionality as migrant workers. While helping and supporting friends is generally a positive thing, sometimes it can also become a burden, especially when migrant workers are compelled to use friendships as strategies to navigate a precarious living situation. There are also risks associated with making friendship commitments amid the unstable context of migration. Recognising this 'dark side' of friendships would help us to gain a fuller picture of the multifaceted nature of friendship, of which the meaning is fluid and constantly under negotiation in different contexts.

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