Identity and Political Participation among First-Generation Immigrants from Mainland China in the UK

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates how first-generation migrants from Mainland China in the UK construct identity and navigate participation with a particular focus on the complex legacies of 'authoritarian socialisation'. Departing from assimilationist and behavioural models, it reconceptualises political participation not as a checklist of visible actions, but as a strategic form of identity regulation shaped by various contexts: authoritarian residues, institutional constraints, and digital infrastructures.

Methodologically, drawing on auto-photography, political photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews, the study adopts a multi-modal qualitative methodology rooted in the constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. The analytical process is guided by Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which can provide thick and in-depth interpretation of complicated contents.

The thesis advances four identity strategies and two identity-political participation co-construction frameworks: the Networked Political Model, which explains how participation adjusts rather than transforms pre-existing identity structures; and the Dialectical–Emergence Model, which captures moments of rupture, reconstitution, and ideological recalibration. These are further elaborated through six sub-models that illuminate the diverse strategies migrants employ when negotiating identity shifts and political engagements.

The thesis culminates in the articulation of the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC)—a synthetic framework that reframes political participation not as an extension or result of stable identity formation or evolution, but as an assemblage of strategically deployed identity modules. It theorises migrants not as subjects progressing toward political legibility, but as strategic actors configuring visibility across conflicting contexts and engaging with political activities selectively and wisely.

This research is one of the first systematic studies that reveals political participation and identity among the first-generation mainland Chinese immigrants. Although the finding may not be representative of the political activities of the entire Chinese community in the UK, it contributes to the theorisation of diasporic political participation in a transnational context. The MIPC framework shows that first-generation migrants from mainland China integrate into society neither through complete assimilation nor through complete rejection, but rather through dynamic adjustments of silence, expression, and selective visibility in overlapping contexts—including the Chinese political system, British multiculturalism, and transnational digital space.

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Allow me to say something personal as well. This thesis began with an academic question, but it eventually became something more. As a first-generation migrant from Mainland China, I have always been searching for my place in the world. This work is not just a research project— it is my attempt to speak, seriously and sincerely, with the world. Writing it was painful. I saw in these interviews my own hesitations, my own fears, my own sense of being caught—between systems I cannot escape and identities I cannot reconcile. I met people who were so much like me. I realised I wasn't just researching them. I was writing with them, about us.

I come from a family of Chinese intellectuals. From a young age, my grandfather and my father taught me what it meant to carry the responsibility of being a scholar. They believed in the Confucian ethic: cultivating the self, governing the state, and serving the world. These ideals once shaped my decision to study politics. I believed that to be a Chinese intellectual was, fundamentally, to care for others.

But during this research, I was forced to examine myself. I struggled. I questioned. I tried. At times, I felt I was watching myself from afar—performing the role of the intellectual, speaking with confidence while feeling uncertain. I was reminded, painfully, that we are all flawed. Not because we have ideals, but because we often pretend to understand what we do not. We try to define what cannot be defined. We think we are outside the world, but we are always inside it.

In an old Chinese poem from the *Book of Songs*, there is a line that reads: *"For whom do I serve my lord? Why must I sink into the mud?"* That line captures the question at the heart of politics—not only in ancient China but also now. Why do we obey? When do we resist? What does loyalty mean in a world that constantly shifts?

Modern political science still hasn't moved beyond these questions. We are still trying to understand what it means to act, to comply, to dissent. For migrants who cross oceans and borders, who live between languages and legal systems, these questions are not abstract. They are lived. We are born into structures we did not choose. We make decisions in contexts we do not and cannot control.

So, this thesis is, in a way, a long poem. It is written not just for myself but for all the first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants I had the honour of speaking with. It tries to ask a question that Chinese people have been asking for over three thousand years: *What are we really obeying? What are we really resisting? Where did we come from, and where are we trying to go?*

These questions do not have clear answers. In a world that is always changing, they may never have answers. But to try—to make the effort to reflect, to speak, to write—is already a form of resistance.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis presents original work and that I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Abbreviations

CCP ---- Communist Party of China

MIPC ---- Modular Identity–Participation Configuration

PRC ----- People's Republic of China

RTA ---- Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SIT ----   Social Identity Theory

SICT ---- Social Identity Complexity Theory

UK   ---- The United Kingdom

UN   ---- The United Nations

Chapter 1: Introduction: Identity Construction under Authoritarian Legacy – The Case of First-Generation Mainland Chinese Migrants in the UK

1.1 The Problem: Identity in Displacement, Not Political Behaviour

If politics is the measure of what is public, who decides who appears within it? If participation is the visible form of civic belonging, what becomes of those who neither speak nor are spoken to? In the long tradition from Aristotle to Arendt, the political has been defined not merely by institutional engagement but by a mode of being-in-common—a shared horizon in which the self is made present through speech, judgment, and recognition (Aristotle, 1996; Arendt, 1958). Participation is not just what citizens do; it is what renders them legible as citizens at all. To be recognised as political is to appear, to act, to be counted.

But this assumption carries a dilemma: it universalises a grammar of politics that is far from universally available. Some people say that identity is about being visible. That is when you speak, or show who you are, then you can belong. But this is not always true. Not everyone wants to be seen, and not everyone can be seen safely. And some people do not even know how to be seen in the way the world expects—because the rules are not made by them.

There are people who grow up learning that silence is safer than speech. That implies that not saying is also a way of saying. That if you say too much, or say it in the wrong way, it can bring trouble. For them, speech is not freedom, but exposure.

This thesis begins there, not where identity is fully expressed, but where it is held back, managed, hidden, or delayed. I want to understand those moments. When silence is not empty, but full of meaning. When not speaking is not the end of politics, but the beginning of something else. How can we interpret these moments and do these moments make sense?

Within the UK, ethnic Chinese residents are consistently positioned at the margins of public civic life. According to the Office for National Statistics (2022), they report the lowest levels of voter registration and turnout among all major ethnic groups, and are underrepresented in political parties, local governance, and protest culture. This has led to their portrayal—both in popular media and academic analysis—as a politically disengaged minority. But such

designations flatten the diversity and complexity. They erase the heterogeneity of the category "British Chinese," which includes British-born citizens, Hong Kong migrants, Southeast Asian Chinese, international students, and most crucially for this study, first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants: those who arrived as adults, bearing the institutional memories, discursive habits, and political silences of the People's Republic of China.

The first-generation Chinese immigrants from mainland China are not merely absent from political participation, but they are strictly displaced from recognition by the mainstream society. As Scott (1990) argues, political expression is not always public—what lies on the surface may conceal a subtext of subversion, fear, or tactical withdrawal. In this view, what appears as passivity may be a form of survival: not a lack of engagement, but a carefully managed avoidance of civic misrecognition, institutional exposure, or transnational consequences.

Mainland-born Chinese migrants inhabit this double bind. They are socialised under an authoritarian state where identity is always associated with the CCP-led political education (Xi, 2020), which made the UK mainstream society become suspicious about their positions and their ability to fit into the UK democratic society. Their silence is neither natural nor accidental; it is cultivated, historicised, and rational. And yet, existing political science models often treat this silence as a variable to be explained away.

Mainstream political participation research, particularly in the liberal-democratic tradition, rests on a behaviourist paradigm. The civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) treats participation as a function of resources, recruitment, and motivation. Later adaptations extend this model to immigrant populations, arguing that formal engagement increases with naturalisation, education, and civic skills (Bloemraad, 2006). But such models assume a shared desire for participation and a normative alignment between visibility and inclusion. In doing so, they mistake participation for presence and non-participation for absence.

This thesis breaks with that assumption. It treats political participation not as an index of democratic development or integration, but as a site of identity regulation—a mode through which subjects negotiate recognition, fear, and positioning. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue, identity should not be reified as a thing, but understood as a practice: something done, claimed, denied, or performed. Yuval-Davis (2011) extends this by showing how belonging is

always embedded in *the politics of belonging*—the contested, often exclusive fields in which recognition takes place. Within this frame, participation is not merely what one does; it is part of how one survives visibility.

For mainland Chinese migrants in the UK, political participation cannot be reduced to merely turning out for all party politics; their engagement with politics can be far more complicated. Due to personal or family ties in China, their attitudes towards the Chinese government and politics can become subtle. Thus, their political participation may occur under constraints, making it difficult for them to choose to vote or to speak out in public expressions of protest. Sometimes, expressing a sentiment ominously on Telegram can serve as a strategic negotiation of their transnational risks and considerations for safety. Furthermore, learning about democratic institutions and procedures can feel burdensome. The persistent fragility of public recognition also prevents them from engaging with mainstream politics.

This study, therefore, repositions the analytic framework. It does not ask *why Chinese migrants in the UK participate or not.* Rather, it asks: *how do subjects marked by Chinese-style political socialisation, racialised difference, and digital dislocation practice political identity under conditions where recognition is partial, precarious, and sometimes dangerous?*

In answering this question, participation is no longer a dependent variable but a conceptual lens through which identity becomes visible, sometimes in presence, often in absence. Identity, in this account, is not what is gained through participation, but what is made by participation in a contested field saturated with silence, visibility, surveillance, fear and more.

1.2 The Research Subject: First-Generation Mainland Chinese Migrants

1.2.1 History of the Chinese Diaspora in the UK

To trace the history of the Chinese presence in Britain is to follow a path often written in whispers—along dockside alleys, laundry shop backrooms, and the kitchens of takeaways. It is a history not of imperial assertion, but of quiet endurance, of men arriving alone and building lives along margins. If Britain once ruled vast parts of Asia, it never ruled the Chinese mainland. And yet, the Chinese arrived—not as citizens of the empire, but as exceptions to its logic.

The earliest presence of Chinese individuals in Britain dates back to the 17th century, most iconically with Michael Alphonsius Shen Fuzong, a Catholic convert received by James II in 1687—a moment of symbolic visibility, without demographic continuity. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, small numbers of Chinese seamen and traders began to settle in Britain's port cities—Liverpool, London, and Cardiff—often employed in the merchant navy or clustered in laundries and restaurants (Benton and Gomez, 2014). These were largely male, transient figures: legislatively unexcluded, but socially unrecognised, constructed not as political subjects but as racialised labourers shaped by imperial suspicion and domestic invisibility (Yeh, 2014). Their presence constituted a tolerated anomaly—visible in street corners but invisible in civic registers.

After World War II, the shape of the diaspora began to change. Between the 1950s and 1980s, large numbers of Chinese migrants arrived from Hong Kong's rural New Territories, many through kinship-based chain migration. Most found employment in the expanding catering trade, where the stereotype of the "industrious Chinese" took bureaucratic root (Parker, 1995). These Cantonese-speaking, British passport-holding colonial subjects were folded into Britain's nascent multiculturalism: counted in censuses, recognised by local councils, and included in ethnic liaison schemes. And yet, their cultural worlds remained bounded—by language, labour, and a politics of model minority performance (Parker, 1995).

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, migration patterns diversified. The British Chinese community came to include Mainlanders, Malaysians, Singaporeans, and Taiwanese migrants, as well as international students. These newer arrivals brought cultural capital and English fluency, shifting the diaspora's public image from low-wage industriousness to educational success and entrepreneurial promise (Archer et al., 2010). However, such reframings often concealed the significant internal heterogeneity of the "Chinese in Britain" category—a heterogeneity that became increasingly apparent with the arrival of Mainland-born adult migrants after the millennium.

The early 21st century has marked a quiet yet profound demographic transformation. In the wake of China's Reform and Opening policies, coupled with the liberalisation of outbound migration in the 1990s, a growing wave of first-generation Mainland Chinese adults began arriving in the UK—not as colonial subjects or war refugees, but as students, skilled workers, entrepreneurs, and family migrants. What began as a thin stream of scholarship holders evolved into a complex flow of self-funded students, transnational professionals, and long-term settlers.

According to the 2021 UK Census, over 445,000 people identified as ethnically Chinese in England and Wales—about 1% of the population (ONS, 2022). A significant and increasing share of this group was born in Mainland China, with Mandarin displacing Cantonese as the dominant spoken language in many new community formations. However, the current data from the ONS unfortunately failed to distinguish the second generation from the first generation. Moreover, it lacks a clear demographic description of the Chinese migrant community. It is extremely hard to know the origins of recorded Chinese immigrants. I have also checked data from local councils across England. Unfortunately, most councils fail to provide detailed data about the Chinese population, as many have classified Chinese individuals as East Asian.

The only thing we know is that first-generation mainland Chinese immigrants are notably distinct from earlier Chinese diasporas. They are overwhelmingly socialised within post-Mao Mainland China, where political participation is shaped by ideological constraint, and identity formation occurs within a framework of homogeneity and state-managed aspiration (Brady, 2008; Zhao, 1998).

They do not share the colonial bilingualism of Hong Kong migrants, nor the diasporic cosmopolitanism of Southeast Asian Chinese. Many arrive after adulthood, carrying with them deeply internalised scripts of political caution, cultural pragmatism, and social mistrust. Their fluency in global capitalism is often unmatched by their integration into local civic institutions (Benton and Gomez, 2014; Wang, 2017).

This thesis recognises that history not only marks who is present, but who is presumed. The British Chinese imaginary has been built through colonial legibility—those who could be named, counted, and recognised within existing race and migration paradigms. First-generation Mainland migrants fall outside this script. It is in this historical lacuna that their identity becomes not a category, but a question—how does one belong when the archive has no name for you?

1.2.2 Historical political organising among Chinese migrants in Britain

Although 'Chinese' people accounted for only about 0.8 per cent of the population of England and Wales in the 2021 Census, Chinese and wider ESEA migrants have a much longer history of collective organisation and political practice in Britain than the "model minority" stereotype

of the present day would suggest - (based on figures from the Office for National Statistics (2022)). Accordingly, early Chinese seafarers and laundry workers did not merely "quietly assimilate"; they formed trade unions and mutual-aid societies, participated in industrial disputes, and confronted the British state. Thanks to campaigns by descendants of affected seafarers, the wartime organizing of the Liverpool Chinese Seamen's Union and the 1942 strike over unequal pay and conditions, followed by the post-war forced repatriation and deportation of hundreds of Chinese seafarers, are now acknowledged in parliamentary debate as a moment of racialized labour conflict and state violence rather than a marginal episode in migration history - as affirmed by Hansard (2021). This longer arc complicates the image of Chinese migrants as apolitical economic actors.

From the 1970s onwards, the growth of catering, garment and later service-sector employment underpinned the consolidation of Chinese community centres, clan and regional associations, Chinese-language schools and welfare-oriented voluntary organisations across the UK. Projects such as the British Chinese Workforce Heritage initiative, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, have documented how Chinese migrants organised both at the workplace and in local communities in order to negotiate racial discrimination, workplace exploitation and welfare exclusion, as well as to articulate claims on local authorities (National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2011). Local associations such as the Newham Chinese Association – established as a hub for advice, social activities and linguistic mediation in East London – indicate how migrant organisations have also become semi-formal governance intermediaries, delivering social-care, mental-health and hate-crime support in partnership with local councils and funders (London Borough of Newham, n.d.). Historically, then, organisational life has combined cultural, welfare and explicitly political functions, even where the language of "politics" is not foregrounded.

In the 1990s, these more community-based formations intersected with newer, media-centred and pan-diasporic modes of organising. Parker and Song's work on British Chinese youth has shown how online forums and digital spaces became crucial sites for negotiating "new ethnicities", articulating British Chinese identities and debating racism, gender, inter-generational conflict and belonging (Parker and Song 2009; Parker et al. 2011). As this occurred, explicitly political organisations began to emerge which sought to channel Chinese and wider ESEA voters into British party politics. Groups such as the British Chinese Project (BCP), Chinese Liberal Democrats and Conservative Friends of the Chinese have worked to

register voters, broker relationships between community leaders and political elites, and promote the visibility of Chinese and ESEA candidates inside mainstream parties (Cabinet Office 2017; Liberal Democrats n.d.; Conservative Friends of the Chinese n.d.). These formations do not simply "integrate" a pre-given community into a neutral party system; they help to construct who counts as a Chinese or ESEA political subject, and on what terms.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a further, very different wave of organising. In response to a sharp increase in anti-Chinese and anti-ESEA racism during 2020, a coalition of charities and community groups launched Confronting COVID-Related Hate: Standing with Britain's Chinese, East & South East Asian Communities, an emergency project led by Protection Approaches, Chinese Welfare Trust and Newham Chinese Association (Protection Approaches, 2020). The project supported victims of hate crime, provided multilingual information on rights and reporting, and built new channels between community organisations, police and local authorities. In parallel, the ESEA Data Collective, coordinated by Voice ESEA with academic partners, used Freedom of Information requests to quantify anti-ESEA hate crimes across UK police jurisdictions, producing one of the first systematic, UK-wide datasets on anti-ESEA victimisation (Voice ESEA, 2024). Here, quantitative evidence and advocacy were explicitly linked: community-driven data were mobilised as an instrument for influencing police practice, public policy and funding priorities. These fed into more overtly contentious street-level mobilisation: for example, Stop Asian Hate UK demonstrations in London, Birmingham and other cities brought together British Chinese, ESEA and South Asian groups, trade-union activists and local politicians in public protest against pandemic racism (Carr, 2021; Bao, 2021). For Bao, these protests did more than register grievance: they enacted a provisional, pan-Asian political identity cutting across existing community boundaries and re-positioning ESEA subjects as active political agents rather than silent minorities (Bao, 2021). Around the same period, the launching of ESEA Heritage Month – led by the campaign group besea.n and supported by cultural institutions and the Greater London Authority – further institutionalised ESEA as a recognised category within British cultural and civic life (besea.n, n.d.; Greater London Authority, 2021). These campaigns both draw on and trouble the category of "Chinese", foregrounding solidarities and tensions within and beyond it.

At the level of classification, these organisational histories point to an important epistemic problem for this thesis. Official statistics aggregate diverse populations under broad labels such as "Chinese" or "East and South East Asian", while activist and cultural formations

increasingly mobilise pan-ESEA or BESEA identities as strategic tools for anti-racist organising (Office for National Statistics, 2022; Yeh, 2021; Bao, 2021). Community organisations on the ground – Chinese associations, faith communities, pan-ESEA networks – routinely bring together migrants and descendants from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia and mixed backgrounds. Because of this, "first-generation migrants from mainland China" cannot be cleanly isolated, either statistically or organisationally, from other Chinese-identified or ESEA-identified groups. They are embedded in overlapping organisational fields and categories whose boundaries are themselves contingent, contested and politically charged. This thesis offers only an overview of the organizing activities within the broader Chinese community, rather than detailed insights into mainland Chinese organizations, as specific information about their activities and participants is not publicly accessible.

1.2.3 Why First-Generation Mainland Chinese Migrants

In this study, the term first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants refers to individuals who were born and socialised in Mainland China, defined here explicitly as the territory under direct governance of the central government of the People's Republic of China, excluding Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan—and who migrated to the United Kingdom after reaching the age of eighteen. This generational distinction is grounded in sociological migration theory. As Rumbaut (2004) and Zhou and Bankston (1998) argue, first-generation migrants are those who experience their primary and secondary socialisation entirely in the country of origin, arriving as legal adults. In contrast, 1.5-generation migrants arrive in childhood or adolescence, experiencing a split socialisation between origin and host societies, while second-generation refers to individuals born in the host country to at least one foreign-born parent.

The distinction is not semantic but foundational. First-generation adults bring with them a fully formed sociopolitical orientation—what Bourdieu (1990) might call a habitus—rooted in Mainland China's particular institutional, ideological, and social contexts. Their views on governance, speech, risk, and authority are shaped by an educational system and civic culture that valorise national unity, social conformity, and political discretion. Unlike the 1.5-generation, they do not internalise British schooling norms, nor do they traverse the identity negotiations common to second-generation migrants navigating dual heritage. (Chan & Pun, 2009; Bourdieu, 1990).

This research includes only those who have resided in the UK for at least six consecutive months or 183 days. Although the United Nations classifies a long-term migrant as someone residing abroad for twelve months or more (UN Statistics Division, 1998), the UK's own legal framework recognises six months (183 days) as the threshold for tax residency, with Scotland additionally granting voting rights to residents in local and devolved elections (HM Revenue & Customs,2025; Scottish Government, 2020). Six months, therefore, is not a minimal technical threshold, but a marker of legal and symbolic embeddedness—a point at which migrants are addressed as subjects within the British civic regime, regardless of citizenship status.

This study does not pay attention to the legal status of an immigrant. Also, according to the requirement of the ethics committee, this study has not interviewed any undocumented immigrants, but still treats non-naturalised first-generation Chinese immigrants as an integral and important part of this community. They are legal residents, they can participate in many political activities, they have interactions with established naturalised first-generation Chinese immigrants, their behaviours and attitudes also shape the public attitudes towards this community, and in Scotland, they can vote in local elections. To separate this group from naturalised immigrants would significantly reduce the diversity and reliability of this research.

Crucially, this population is often marginalised within both host society discourse and intra-diasporic hierarchies. Mainstream academic and policy discussions tend to centre on more visible subgroups such as British-born Chinese, Hong Kong BNO passport holders, and transnational elites. While many first-generation migrants from Mainland China do not quite fit the traditional image of the "British Chinese"—an identity largely shaped by earlier immigrants from Hong Kong—their language skills, migration paths, and socio-economic backgrounds often place them in complex, sometimes uneven, positions within existing Chinese community groups and support systems. But this does not mean they are always excluded or unable to take part. What it really shows is that some of the structures in place were not built with their specific experiences, languages, or cultural backgrounds in mind.

Talking about "Chinese migrants" in Britain highlights a broad, vague category filled with diverse groups: Hong Kong BNO passport holders, Taiwanese professionals, Southeast Asian Chinese, British-born citizens, and international students. The first-generation Mainland Chinese migrant—arriving as an adult and shaped by Mainland institutions—remains largely

unreadable. This isn't due to numbers but narrative: Hong Kong migrants, especially BNO visa holders, often carry political narratives in protest, English, and rights (Veg, 2017). Taiwanese migrants embody cosmopolitanism, geopolitically ambivalent, mobile, aligned with Western discourses (Fell, 2017). Southeast Asian Chinese migrants, many from earlier waves, are recognised through language schools, community networks, and associations. International students, though transient, are seen as aspirational, integrated into multicultural policy and university branding(Christiansen, 2003；Yeh, 2014).

But the Mainland-born migrant who arrives as an adult occupies no such narrative space. Their language may be Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Wu, or Hokkien—not the language but the *regime of meaning* it carries distinguishes them. What marks them is not dialect, but the pedagogical state that produced their speech habits: an environment where language was standardised not for expression but for alignment, where speaking was less a right than a risk. Unlike their diasporic counterparts, whose cultural codes are shaped by colonial hybridity or market mobility, first-generation Mainland migrants bear the imprint of political standardisation of citizenship scripted through silence, and belonging mediated by ideological calibration.

As Brubaker (2005) observes, diaspora is not simply about dispersion across space; it is about invocability—the capacity to be summoned as a legitimate representative of a collective identity. The Mainland-born adult migrant is rarely invoked. In this context, some people talked about feeling like outsiders in established community spaces, while others ran into tensions—often because of differences in how they speak, their social class, or political views. So the point is not that Mainland Chinese migrants cannot be seen or do not belong, but rather that how they are recognised and included varies. It is a process that depends on the situation and is shaped by how different organisations, local authorities, and Chinese networks operate.

This study focuses on this group not because others are irrelevant, but because this group sits precisely at the boundary of visibility and erasure. They have distance to the host society and have distance to the established British Chinese community. They inhabit a different space altogether: one in which identity and participation do not align, where political speech is entangled with fear, and where silence is not withdrawal but a mode of being.

To study first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants is not merely to illuminate a demographic gap; it is to confront a theoretical absence. Within the field of migration studies, the political

behaviours of those arriving from non-democratic states have received increasing attention—particularly in relation to refugees and exiles from the Middle East, North Africa, and post-Soviet spaces. Scholars have explored how memories of repression, surveillance infrastructures, and post-authoritarian trauma shape civic withdrawal, political reconfiguration, or even radicalisation in exile (Düvell, 2011; Koinova, 2021). Yet in this growing literature, Mainland Chinese migrants are strikingly underrepresented. When they do appear, it is often as economic actors or cultural others—not as political subjects embedded in structures of silence and adjustment.

This erasure is particularly acute in the UK context. While studies in sociology and education have explored British Chinese identity through the perspectives of racialisation, language maintenance, and intergenerational education (Yeh, 2014; Archer et al., 2010), the political science literature, especially in English, remains virtually silent on Chinese migrants, not only in empirical investigation, but in conceptual framing. There is no established typology, no theory of political socialisation in migration, and no comparative framework that situates Chinese migrants alongside other authoritarian-origin diasporas. It suggests that Chinese migrants are not yet seen as *political* and thus fall outside the bounds of what migration scholars deem worthy of civic analysis.

This thesis seeks to reframe that field. It argues that first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants represent not a marginal case, but a critical site through which to theorise the limits of political legibility. Their participation offers a unique lens to examine how identity is negotiated under conditions of democratic invitation and authoritarian residue.

This research does not treat migrants from Mainland China as if they are just products of a single, top-down authoritarian system. That would be too simplistic. Instead, it looks at how many of them grew up in an environment heavily shaped by long-running political messaging, strong nationalist narratives, and a schooling system grounded in ideology. These influences did not just vanish when they moved abroad—they often continued to shape how people think, feel, and assess risk, even after settling in the UK.

That said, it is important to stress: this does not mean all Mainland Chinese migrants are the same, or that their choices are not their own. People come to the UK for all kinds of reasons—education, work, family, personal goals. Migration paths are diverse. The point here is not to suggest that every migrant is following some state-driven plan. Rather, it aims to explore how

growing up in a politically charged system can leave patterns in how people engage with the world, without reducing them to a stereotype.

By framing them within political theory, it broadens the study of authoritarian diasporas and introduces Chinese migrants as active political subjects, not just as migrants from China. This approach offers new insights into authoritarian legacies, migrant citizenship, and democratic participation, showing how identity and participation are complexly intertwined beyond mere rights and institutions.

Given these dynamics, this thesis deliberately avoids the analytic frame of diaspora, which often presupposes collective identity, symbolic return, or ethno-national mobilisation—elements that are largely absent, and sometimes actively avoided, among this group. This point will be further elaborated in section 1.3 by analysing the fragmented and complex contexts that the first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants are facing.

1.3 Context – From Authoritarian Socialisation to UK Pluralism

1.3.1 Authoritarian Socialisation as a Mode of Political Conduct

Authoritarianism is commonly introduced into political science as a normative absence: a regime type defined by the lack of liberal rights, representative institutions, or civic participation (Linz, 2000; Dahl, 1971). This is quite a Eurocentric concept.

Before engaging with the concept of authoritarianism, it is necessary to clarify a terminological choice in this thesis. As a researcher trained in political science, I recognise that the category "authoritarian regime" has been widely applied to the People's Republic of China in comparative politics (Linz, 2000; Geddes et al., 2018). However, I do not fully agree with the reduction of China's political reality to a singular regime type. The Chinese political system is historically and institutionally complex, shaping by a long Confucian bureaucratic tradition, a modern one-party state structure, and a form of political meritocracy in elite selection (Bell, 2015; Perry, 2008), all of which interact with market reforms and social stratification in ways that the generic "authoritarian" label struggles to capture. That label, while analytically convenient, risks flattening the tensions between governance performance, normative legitimacy, and ideological centralisation.

Nonetheless, in the field of migration and diaspora politics, the concept of authoritarianism remains a dominant analytical language for situating origin-country political socialisation (Tsourapas, 2018; Glasius, 2017). In order to engage critically with this literature and to render my work legible within it, I adopt the term "authoritarian" as a working category in this thesis, while emphasising that it refers here to an externally-recognised regime type, not an exhaustive description of China's political system. Where possible, I refer to it more precisely as "the Chinese political system" to acknowledge its specific historical and institutional configuration.

However, for the first generation of Chinese immigrants, authoritarianism is not merely the opposite of democracy. It is difficult to describe it as a system waiting to be liberated by democracy; rather, it is a way of life, a means of political socialisation (Nathan，2017). It may evoke fear, but it also brings stability, confidence, and a deep sense of moral order. It is not merely a tool of oppression but also a unifying force. We should not view authoritarianism through the lens of moral judgment.

To understand authoritarian socialisation in this sense, we must reject the binary of repression and freedom, and turn instead to the grammar of political behaviour. Following Althusser's (1971) theory of ideological state apparatuses, the Chinese state can be seen not as an apparatus of pure coercion but as a pedagogy of embodied norms. From schoolbooks to news broadcasts, from patriotic slogans to the rhythmic silences around anniversaries, individuals are not only taught what not to say—they are taught how to live through government-led participation (Ma and Cao 2023).

As Wright (2010) and Yang (2009) show, many Mainland citizens internalise this conduct not through fear alone, but through a negotiated trust in institutional stability. Authoritarian governance does not rely solely on coercion; it operates through affective codes—scripts of responsibility, harmony, and moral duty. These codes cultivate not only compliance but emotional investment in order, stability, and nationhood. As Yang (2009) illustrates, such affective structures are reproduced in online political life, where expressions of loyalty and nationalist affect circulate as moral currencies. For migrants, this affective logic does not dissolve upon relocation. It persists as a mode of judgement, orientation, and relational belonging: authoritarianism becomes the architecture through which political subjectivity was first learned and later remembered.

Crucially, this thesis does not treat authoritarianism as a moral pathology. It views it as a lived political rhythm which is intelligible, durable, and historically grounded. Many Mainland Chinese do not perceive their political past as "impoverished" or "incomplete." As Bell (2015) and Perry (2008) argue, political legitimacy in China largely relies on political meritocracy, economic performance, patriotism, and moral education. The government, or the state, is not necessarily a space for negotiation but an educator. The public space is not always designed for discussion but for cultivation. This represents a kind of moral economy of governance based on meritocracy that is culturally distinct from the UK style.

In liberal democratic countries like the UK, political participation is seen as a symbol of belonging. However, when immigrants remain silent, lack participation, or are passive, they may become invisible and less noticeable in society. Yet they may not be truly silent but simply express themselves in different ways. This is particularly true for immigrant groups with varying degrees of political socialisation and differing socialisation processes. Therefore, understanding authoritarianism as the cornerstone of political culture for the first generation of mainland Chinese immigrants is crucial, as it exerts a lasting influence on socially integrated immigrants and shapes their choices regarding political participation in the new society.

1.3.2 Multiculturalism and the Colonial Politics of Legibility in the UK

Multiculturalism is often narrated as liberal democracy's moral response to difference: a vision of the state in which plural identities may coexist without coercion, each culture allowed to speak, appear, and locate. But this narrative is not without conditions—it speaks the language of inclusion, but often enacts the politics of partition in reality. As Ahmed (2012) incisively argues, to be "included" in institutional diversity is to be marked by it: to be welcomed on the condition of one's difference, made visible only through one's recognisable cultural contours. Inclusion is not an invitation to equality—it is a management of difference under the sign of tolerance.

In the UK, multiculturalism, like a set of grammatical rules, has never been merely about coexistence, but rather a systemically shaped framework of cultural legibility. The state does not view minority groups as free-flowing citizens, but as pre-classified objects within cultural administration. It funds community groups, appoints "ethnic leaders," and manages them by category. This is more like a pre-defined classification, a product of political correctness.

In this framework, to be politically recognisable is to be representable, to be available for naming, accounting, and performance. This is a kind of normative power; it is a structure of feeling. It is what Hall (1996b) calls "the regime of representation," wherein the Other is made visible only on the terms set by dominant codes.

For Chinese migrants in Britain, this structure has never been neutral. Some Hong Kong migrants, in particular, were historically shaped into legible colonial subjects: English-speaking, institutionally proximate, culturally hybridised. These groups entered the British imagination not only as migrants, but as postcolonial or even colonial cultural figures, produced through a colonial symbolic order and sustained by the institutional British system of education and multicultural governance (Parker, 1995; Yeh, 2014). The point here is not to homogenise Hong Kong migrants, but to highlight how UK state institutions, media and multicultural policy frameworks historically constructed a recognisable "British Chinese" category through which certain Hong Kong-linked identities became legible, while others remained marginal or invisible. Similarly, many Southeast Asian Chinese communities arrived in the UK under post-colonial immigration patterns. The systems and "language"/"grammar" established during the colonial period have long been deeply ingrained in the UK's multicultural infrastructure. Their language, cuisine, and ethnic self-presentation are understood through institutional templates already saturated with colonial characteristics. There are even certain stereotypes. The "Chineseness", from this prespective, is always full of external imagination and expectations (Chun,1996).

Migrants from mainland China, especially those who arrived as adults, do not fit into this structure. They neither speak the English of colonial schools nor the Cantonese infused with British imperial style. They are not refugees, dissidents, or model minorities. They arrived in the UK with different languages and political backgrounds. This background was not shaped by Britain's colonial system and imagination but by China's unified national, ideologically centralised, and educational system, which endowed them with a unique internal clarity distinctively Chinese.

In this context, multiculturalism does not fail to see them—it simply does not know how to view them. They are not merely marginalized; they are structurally unreadable. They do not manifest "Chinese culture" or "Chineseness" in the ways previously anticipated—such as through Chinese takeout or laundry services. They transcend the scope of the national governable differences formed in response to Chinese immigrants primarily from colonial

territories. Moreover, multiculturalism does not only separate minorities from the majority. It also produces internal borders—between those who can be seen and those who cannot, those who can perform and those who fail to meet the expectations. In British Chinese communities, this manifests as representational asymmetry. Hong Kong migrants become spokespeople and recognisable. In the contrast, Mainland migrants become invisible or alien (Yeh, 2018;John, 2024).

This is not incidental; it is colonial in architecture. As Bhabha (1994) and Fanon (2004) argued, empire did not merely repress difference but incorporated it through recognition, hierarchy, and spectacle. The multicultural state inherits this choreography. Its logic is not to dissolve otherness but to aestheticise and manage it.

The first generation of mainland immigrants did not refuse or fail to fulfill their duties through resistance, but rather by adjusting their visibility. We need to view multiculturalism as a means of management rather than promotion of social integration (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy, 2018). The purpose of categorization is to pursue clarity and simplicity. Excessively complex internal group divisions may impose a burden on management. The presence of mainland immigrants has become a crack in the surface of representation, though they are not the only group, disrupting the established imagination of the British Chinese community and multiculturalism: they are an excess that is either too complex or excluded to be heard.

However, this is not the end of the story. The British context is equally unique and complex. When discussing multiculturalism in Britain, one cannot ignore the cultural and symbolic core often described as "Britishness." Kumar (2003) and Colley (1992) have demonstrated that British identity has historically been shaped by imperial history, Protestant traditions, and narratives emphasising insularity and resilience. Although multicultural policies in Britain seem to welcome diverse identities, the symbolic elements of Britishness still remain difficult for outsiders to understand. These symbols are embedded in speech, humour, historical metaphors, and subtle political expressions, which act as social gatekeepers. Gilroy (2004) also critiques the "post-imperial melancholia" influencing British views on race and inclusion, where minorities are included without challenging the existing hierarchy between the British "self" and the ethnic "other." For first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants, without British-style education, these cultural codes can be hard to grasp, deepening the existing gap.

1.3.3 Digital Disjuncture and the Phantom of Participation

To speak of diasporic participation in the 21st century is to speak through platforms. But not all platforms are built alike. For first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants, digital life is not simply mediated—it is inherited. Their only Chinese-using platforms—WeChat, Xiaohongshu (Rednote), Bilibili—do not merely translate offline belonging into online form. They constitute a parallel infrastructure of political feeling, cultural reference, and communicative codes. These platforms are not just tools; they are systems of meaning, saturated with prior socialisation, governed by different ontologies of speech, visibility, and authority (Yang, 2009; Qiu, 2009). This will become an important clue for further analysis in Chapter 7.

This creates a profound digital disjuncture in the British context. Unlike Facebook or WhatsApp, which are embedded in an open, heteroglossic public sphere (although also censored by Meta and some governments), Chinese platforms operate through enclosed ecosystems: censored, linguistically bounded, and algorithmically curated (Sterling，2016). The result is not merely cultural disconnection, but a regime mismatch. British democratic discourse presumes visibility as participation—expression as presence. But within these digital enclaves, presence is strategic, visibility is perilous, and expression is often performative alignment rather than dialogical engagement.

Such spaces are not apolitical. They produce their own emotional architectures: pride rituals, diasporic nostalgia, soft authoritarianism masked in aesthetics. As Anderson (1991) would put it, they form "imagined communities," but ones constrained by platformed sovereignty—governed by Chinese regulatory norms, content protocols, and symbolic authority. This creates a situation in which migrants are not simply networked—they are re-enclosed, participating not in British civic life but in a transnational simulacrum of national belonging.

The consequences are contradictory. migrants may appear to be active in the digital space—sharing, commenting, liking—but their activities circulate within a self-referential system loop, readable only within their own code system, yet inaudible in the British public sphere. This form of participation is not unique to first-generation continental immigrants; it resonates with patterns observed in many transnational communities originating from authoritarian or non-democratic regimes, where online spaces are often hosted or monitored by the country of origin. (Glasius, 2017; Tsourapas, 2018). such as Iranian exiles maintaining politicised yet censored engagement on Persian-language social media (Rahimi, 2011), Egyptian activists overseas

navigating surveillance and platform control (Khalil, 2014), and Russian migrants using VKontakte communities under extraterritorial monitoring (Etling et al., 2010). Yet even in democratic-origin diasporas, platformed interaction can remain self-referential: studies of the Trinidadian diaspora (Miller and Slater, 2000) and global Filipino online networks (Brinkerhoff, 2009) show how linguistic, cultural, and algorithmic factors can concentrate engagement within the community, limiting its resonance in the host public sphere.

In such contexts, digital platforms are double-edged swords, connecting people with similar backgrounds and maintaining censorship from the home regime. What distinguishes the Mainland Chinese case, however, is the dominance of a linguistically and politically bounded platform ecology—such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu—that is deeply integrated into everyday life and yet structurally misaligned with British civic discourse. This ecology is unique and only used by Mainland Chinese, and the cooperation between Chinese tech giants and governments is deeper and more systematic than in other cases. More importantly, this form of digital participation is not merely a supplement to online political participation—it may also replace traditional political participation. On these platforms, migrants can easily obtain emotional security, linguistic and cultural identity, but they also relinquish their visibility in the local political sphere. Their digital sense of belonging does not signify integration but rather an alternative. What emerges is not the silence of citizens but a misalignment of participation: political self-expression is shifted from the institutional world they inhabit to a digital world that can understand it yet is rife with limitations.

This argument suggests that this digital disconnect cannot be viewed merely as a communication barrier, but rather as a shift in philosophical stance—a rupture in the ontological assumptions of participation, identity, and recognizability. When migrants construct their world through platforms that do not conform to the norms of liberal public life, their identity work becomes structurally incomprehensible. Their silence is not a refusal, but rather the possibility that voices "elsewhere" are not being heard.

Based on these contexts, while this thesis examines first-generation mainland Chinese migrants in the UK, it does not conceptualise them within a diasporic framework. Diaspora studies, especially in its classical formulations (Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991), assumes the presence of symbolic return, collective memory, and shared political or cultural mobilisation across borders. Even more critical renditions (Brah, 1996; Anthias, 1998;

Brubaker, 2005) maintain that diaspora implies at least a minimal form of imagined cohesion, positionality vis-à-vis the homeland, or transnational affective orientation.

From the perspective of first-generation migrants from Mainland China living in the UK, the possibilities for political engagement are not just shaped by their experiences with authoritarian rule back home. They are also heavily influenced by how the British state itself operates. Since 2012, policies from the Home Office – what is often referred to as the "hostile environment" – have reshaped everyday life by turning ordinary institutions like landlords, banks, employers, and even the NHS into informal border guards. These actors are now required to check immigration status, and in some cases, deny services or report people without the right papers (Praxis, 2024; JCWI, 2024).

But it is not just those without legal status who are affected. These policies create a wider climate of uncertainty. Migrants with complex or fragile legal situations constantly live with the fear of being questioned, denied services, or simply not being recognised properly. The "no recourse to public funds" (NRPF) policy makes things even harder. It blocks many migrants – even those here legally on work, study, or family visas – from accessing essentials like welfare support, housing, or financial help. This often pushes people into debt, poverty, and risky or exploitative jobs (Praxis, 2025).

For migrants from Mainland China, who may already view the state as something intrusive, harsh, and hard to navigate because of their upbringing, these UK policies do not come across as liberal or fair. Instead, they feel like another layer of surveillance and punishment – just configured differently.

Zooming out, the political climate in the UK around race and immigration has added fuel to the fire. Xenophobic and racialised rhetoric has become more mainstream. The UN's Special Rapporteur has noted how austerity, the hostile environment, and the Windrush scandal have all deepened racial inequality, hitting communities of colour especially hard (OHCHR, 2018; UNHRC, 2019). Media and political narratives often lump "migrants" together with terms like "illegal", "abuse", and "threat" – framing migration as a problem (Julios-Costa and Montiel-McCann, 2025; The Guardian, 2019).

Data from the Migration Observatory shows that migrants face discrimination not just because of their legal status, but also due to how they speak, their accent, nationality, religion, or

ethnicity. Discrimination in housing and work continues to be a serious issue (Migration Observatory, 2024). For first-generation Chinese migrants, it is not just about being watched or policed by their home government. It is also about navigating a British system that ties participation – even being seen as a valid member of society – to a fragile legal status. This creates a culture of fear where engaging politically means constantly weighing the risks of being visible, misunderstood, or punished.

These issues have only grown since Brexit. When freedom of movement officially ended on January 1, 2021, the UK introduced a new points-based immigration system. Politicians framed this as taking back control of the borders and building a "firm but fair" approach (APPG on Migration, 2021; Institute for Government, 2019; HM Government, 2021). In practice, it meant opening up some routes – especially for workers in care and agriculture – while tightening the rules elsewhere. Migrants, including students and skilled workers, have become more reliant on sponsors and face stricter conditions.

Despite a change in language from a "hostile" to a "compliant" environment, the core idea remains the same: responsibility for enforcing immigration rules is passed down to landlords, employers, and public services (APPG on Migration, 2021; Free Movement, 2018; Institute for Government, 2019). At the same time, laws like the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023 have doubled down on treating asylum and border control as security issues. These laws make it easier to reject people as inadmissible or send them to so-called "safe third countries" (HM Government, 2021; UK Parliament, 2023; Law Society, 2023; International Rescue Committee, 2024).

Although these measures target asylum seekers and small boat arrivals on the surface, they also shape how migration is discussed more broadly – often in terms of crisis, illegality, and security threats. For Chinese migrants arriving under student, skilled-worker, or family visas, this tightening environment reinforces the sense that their right to be here, to work, to access services, and to feel like they belong is always at risk.

So, in this context, British immigration policy is not just background noise. It is a key part of the structure that shapes how migrants – especially those from authoritarian backgrounds – navigate racism, fear, and uncertain legal status. It directly impacts their decisions about if, how, and where they might get politically involved.

However, through the reconstruction of these three contexts, this thesis finds that first-generation migrants from mainland China face a structural reality that continuously undermines the conditions for the existence of a diaspora. The socialisation process of authoritarianism weakens the emotional and discursive foundations of sustained collective identity, replacing it with alienation and political caution. British multiculturalism only provides identity through racialised screening mechanisms, which often renders mainland Chinese migrants invisible or incomprehensible in the mainstream narrative of 'Chinese diaspora'. Digital platform spaces exacerbate this rupture, exposing migrants to algorithmic risks, surveillance and a fragmented public sphere, rather than promoting lasting connectivity or diaspora agency. More importantly, these risks are often highly personalised. Therefore, rather than a coherent diaspora consciousness, it is more accurate to describe the identity and political participation of first-generation mainland Chinese migrants as fragmented, individually calibrated identities and political practices that are constrained by restrictions. This thesis therefore abandons the diaspora as a category of analysis and instead views identity and participation as a modular, risk-managed process of negotiation within a stratified structure of recognition. This framework will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.3.4 Summary

Across these three contexts, authoritarian legacy, liberal multiculturalism, and digital disjuncture, what emerges is not a linear narrative of transition, but a fractured terrain of identity regulation under incompatible logics. Mainland Chinese migrants do not move from one civic model to another. They exist in a space defined by a triangle where inherited obedience clashes with conditional inclusion, and digital connection replaces institutional presence.

This conceptual starting point renders assimilationist and integrationist frameworks not merely insufficient but structurally misaligned. These theories presume a single normative endpoint: visibility, voice, participation. Yet what this thesis shows is that visibility may not be desirable, voice may not be recognised, and participation may occur elsewhere. Identity, in this context, is not something that joins; it is something that negotiates—between states, systems, and silences.

The research questions that follow do not ask whether migrants adapt, express, or belong. They ask: *Where? How? And at what cost?* In this context, the thesis findings do not belong to a

single political realm but exist at the intersection of three: the pedagogical authority of the Chinese state, the racialised inclusion framework of the British liberal state, and a transnational digital sphere whose logics are elusive to both.

1.4 Research Questions and Aims

This thesis emerges from the recognition that political life is not always performed through the patterns that liberal democracies expect. Some may participate as British. However, among first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants in the UK, the absence of visible participation, such as voting, protesting, or claiming, is not simply a deficit, but may be a reflection of epistemic misalignment—a fundamental tension between traditional political behaviours and the civic norms that regulate recognition, readability, and voice.

To make this tension analytically legible, the thesis situates its inquiry within three intersecting contexts. First, the political legacy of Mainland China's political system is characterised by the formation of political subjectivity not through contestation but through alignment. Second, the racialised selective framework of British multiculturalism promotes inclusion based on performative cultural differences, yet it also makes some subjects incomprehensible. Third, the fragmented digital environment, with platforms like WeChat and Xiaohongshu, creates transnational networks of connection that frequently replace formal civic engagement and maintain some levels of censorship.

These contexts do not merely frame migrant experience; they constitute its very possibility. Identity and participation are not treated here as fixed states or measurable outputs, but as socially produced, discursively organised, and historically situated practices. Accordingly, this research adopts an interpretivist ontology and epistemology: it assumes that reality is not objectively given but constructed through meaning, and that knowledge is generated not by detachment but by situated understanding (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967; Schwartz-Shea, P. and Yanow, D., 2012).

The "how" questions that guide this study are thus not methodological conveniences. They are theoretical positions. To ask *how* is to assert that migrant participation is not a variable to be explained, but a phenomenon to be interpreted.

Research Questions

1. How do first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants participate in politics in and beyond the UK?
2. How do first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants construct and position their identities across different social and political domains?
3. How are participation and identity mutually constituted in moments of practice?
4. How do structural conditions mediate the relationship between identity and participation?

Based on these questions, this thesis advances three interconnected aims and makes contributions accordingly:

1. Theoretical Aim: To reconceptualise the relationship between identity and participation beyond assimilationist or integrationist paradigms, and instead theorise participation as a practice of identity regulation under ideological and institutional contradiction.
2. Empirical Aim: To provide a situated, interpretive account of how first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants in the UK navigate civic life, constructing participation via multiple strategies.
3. Methodological Aim: To develop a reflexive, multi-modal interpretivist framework that integrates in-depth interviews, visual elicitation, and reflexive thematic analysis, capturing the affective, performative, and strategic dimensions of migrant identity-political participation interactions.

In achieving these objectives, this thesis makes contributions in three areas. Theoretically, it challenges the dominant assimilationist and integrationist paradigms in research on migrant political participation. Based on an exploration of identity strategies, this thesis views political participation as a mode of identity modulation shaped by ideological contradictions and structural constraints, rather than a measure of integration, and constructs a new explanatory framework for the co-construction of identity and political participation. Empirically, it provides a detailed and contextualised account of how first-generation mainland Chinese migrants in the UK respond to issues of civic visibility and invisibility through strategic, emotional and performative practices. Methodologically, this thesis introduces a reflexive, multimodal interpretivist framework that combines narrative, visual and emotional data to reveal the complex configurations of identity and political participation that are often overlooked in mainstream research. In summary, this thesis offers an alternative perspective that understands migrant political participation as a conditional and negotiated practice within

unequal power structures, rather than a linear trajectory towards citizenship or belonging, thereby shifting the focus of analysis from outcome to process, and from expression to modulation.

In pursuing these aims, this thesis is not concerned with quantifying political participation, but with understanding the conditions under which it acquires meaning, becomes visible, or slips from view. What emerges is an argument that first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants are not simply cases of incomplete civic incorporation; they stand as living critiques of the normative assumptions that underpin it. Their ways of being—quiet, calculated, and emotionally charged—do not sit outside politics. They inhabit its edges, where dissonance itself becomes a form of political life.

1.5 Methodological Orientation

This study is grounded in an interpretivist methodological orientation, informed by a constructivist ontology and a meaning-centred epistemology. In contrast to positivist frameworks that treat political behaviour and identity as objectively measurable variables, this thesis approaches both as situated, negotiated, and socially constructed practices (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Reality is not "discovered" but interpreted; knowledge is not found but co-produced through context, language, and reflexivity (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Accordingly, the aim of this research is not to test hypotheses or measure participation rates, but to understand how political subjectivity and identity emerge through lived experience under structural constraint.

This philosophical commitment aligns directly with the "how"-framed research questions posed in section 1.4. These questions presuppose that political participation is not a universal category, but a contingent and context-bound phenomenon, shaped by inherited socialisation, institutional grammars, and digital infrastructures. To investigate these dynamics requires a research strategy that is flexible, dialogical, and interpretive—one that foregrounds meaning-making and identity work rather than abstract behaviour.

To this end, the study employs a multi-modal qualitative design that combines political photo elicitation, auto-photography, and semi-structured interviews, all interpreted through the lens of Reflexive Thematic Analysis （Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019). This method assemblage is

not arbitrary. It is conceptually driven by the need to access identity as a visual, affective, discursive and situational construct.

Political photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) involves presenting participants with curated images related to political acts, civic rituals, or symbolic boundaries (e.g., voting booths, protests, flags). Rather than assume what counts as "politics," this technique invites participants to reflect on what these images mean to them, and how they position themselves in relation to state, community, and authority.

Auto-photography(Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006) reverses the gaze: participants are asked to take photographs that reflect their everyday experiences, values, or silences. These images are treated as artefacts of identity performance—fragments of lived daily life, not in the formal sense of institutions, but in the micro-ethics of visibility, belonging, and withdrawal. This is a participant-led research method, offering extremely valuable resources for deep interpretation.

Semi-structured interviews accompany the visual materials to generate thick, reflexive narratives. These interviews are not only aimed at triangulating "truth," but also at drag the research to a systematic structure.

All data are analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), which, unlike traditional thematic coding, treats themes not as objective categories "in" the data, but as co-constructed analytical patterns shaped through interpretive engagement, theoretical grounding, and researcher reflexivity. RTA enables the production of situated theory—an analysis that remains responsive to context, contradiction, and complexity. Detailed discussions of methods will be address in Chapter 4.

In this sense, the methodology is not only a set of techniques; it is a philosophical commitment to situated meaning-making. It reflects the view that identity and participation do not occur in the abstract, but are practised in language, image, gesture, and silence. The methods chosen here are designed not to reduce complexity, but to trace it, and to honour the contingent, often fractured spaces in which migrants navigate between authoritarian pasts, racialised presents, and digital elsewhere.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This chapter aims to do more than simply raise a series of research questions. It reveals a theoretical rupture—a gap between the forms of participation envisioned by liberal democracies and the ways in which first-generation migrants actually participate or experience participation under the intertwined pressures of authoritarian socialization, institutional misrecognition, and digital alienation. First-generation mainland Chinese migrants in the UK are not always politically apathetic, but rather continuously misread; they are not silent, but rather deprived of the opportunity to speak out.

This chapter poses a challenge: if identity is a practice and political participation is a normative domain, how do we explain political existence beyond the liberalist framework? The study suggests abandoning measures of "integration" and instead rethinking "recognition." It focuses more on how identity is recognized, how participation is empowered, by whom it is empowered, and under what conditions both can be achieved. It identifies three key contexts that shape the situation of migrants: authoritarian socialization, racialized British multiculturalism, and transnational digital platforms. These are not merely background factors, but arenas where identity and political participation interact. The thesis adopts an interpretive approach, viewing political participation as a strategic and dynamic process of identity negotiation.

The thesis is guided by four interrelated questions that interrogate how migrants navigate the tensions between inherited political socialisation and new civic scripts, between internalised boundaries and external demands. These questions structure a research design that is multi-modal, reflexive, and qualitative, comprising political photo elicitation, auto-photography, semi-structured interviews, and Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

The remainder of the thesis is organised as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the existing literature. It examines how political science has approached migrant participation, identifies the near-total neglect of Mainland Chinese migrants in UK-based research, and critiques the dominance of assimilation and integration paradigms.

Chapter 3 constructs the theoretical framework of the thesis. It elaborates the interpretivist foundations of the study, introduces core concepts of identity, political participation, and

regulation, and proposes a conceptual model for analysing identity construction across authoritarian, multicultural, and digital fields.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodological architecture. It details the interpretivist logic of the study, introduces the multi-modal research design, and describes the analytic logic of Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Chapters 5 and 6 set out the empirical core of the thesis, tracing how identity is assembled, negotiated, and at times unsettled across multiple social and political domains. Together, they show how identity and political participation are not separate trajectories but mutually shaping processes, unfolding through selective expression, strategic withdrawal, and moments of reconfiguration.

Chapter 7 moves from description to interpretation, framing participation as a mode of identity regulation under constraint. It challenges behaviourist accounts of political action and proposes a new explanatory framework.

Chapter 8 closes the thesis by drawing together its conceptual contributions, reflecting on the methodological and political stakes of the study, and outlining limitations and future directions.

In short, this thesis does not explore whether migrants choose to engage in political expression, but rather under what conditions their voices can be heard and understood. It also does not merely explore whether migrants engage in political participation, but rather how political participation itself has become a complex field. The key issue is not whether the voices of migrants exist in public life, but how the regulatory environment that shapes how these voices are produced, interpreted or suppressed is constructed and functions. From this perspective, political participation is not merely an indicator of integration or inclusion, but a visible performative act shaped by unequal power relations and changes in the logic of visibility. By focusing on the first generation of mainland Chinese migrants in the UK, this study traces how political subjectivity is not only expressed but also negotiated under various constraints. Such negotiations are often subtle and sometimes contradictory. The thesis abandons the normative trajectory from marginalisation to integration and proposes a modular and contextualised explanatory framework for the interaction between identity and political participation, emphasising how migrants construct strategic behaviour patterns under constraints.

Chapter 2 — Literature Review: Identity, Participation, and the Authoritarian Diaspora

Exploring political participation and identity is difficult to do with complete impartiality. This is not merely a matter of describing how people define themselves, nor is it a simple listing of the theoretical domains in which selfhood is mapped. In this chapter, we will enter a series of controversial spaces. There are many tensions that are difficult to fully express between the first generation of migrants from mainland China, between visibility and concealment, between the political theories born in free and democratic countries and the reality of authoritarian memories, and between the ideal form of participation and the actual feelings of being monitored. This chapter does not provide a catalog or integration of existing theories. It provides a breakthrough, reframing, questioning, and reflexive analysis.

For a long time, despite being quite tolerant in its analysis, migrant studies has been constrained by the assumption of a linear movement toward assimilation, integration, or cultural hybridity. Political participation studies have also long focused on visibility: voter turnout, mobilization, protest, and participation. But what if migrants do not want to be seen? What if participation is not about visible presence but silence? What if the identity involved is not about seeking recognition but strategic performance?

This Chapter does not summarise the literature; it interrogates it to reveal the gap this thesis addresses. This chapter unfolds as a layered refusal: of assimilationist paradigms (Gordon, 1964), of behaviourist models of political action (Verba and Nie, 1972), and of identity as a stable possession (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). It is also an attempt to reconceptualise political participation as an ontological site—a field where identity is performed, tested, concealed, and sometimes strategically erased. Drawing on scholarship from political theory, migration studies, discourse analysis, and diaspora studies, this review is structured around a series of theoretical fractures and realignments, aiming to engage in dialogue with established theories. To see whether it is possible to allocate the authoritarian diaspora from China into an in-between area. Each section engages a dominant tradition, not to negate it, but to destabilise its assumptions, to mark its silences, and to construct new conceptual pathways that speak more directly to the lived experiences of first-generation Chinese migrants from authoritarian contexts.

The purpose, then, is not to follow the literature, but to reweave it—threading through its absences, folding its contradictions, and opening space for a theory of identity and participation that begins not with action, but with hesitation.

2.1 Rethinking Political Participation: From Definition to Practice

What does it mean to participate politically? For decades, political science has answered this question with heated discussion. Participation has been framed as a behavioural act—something visible, measurable, institutionally directed. Whether one votes, joins a protest, signs a petition, or campaigns for a cause, political participation has long been defined as *action intended to influence political outcomes* (Verba and Nie, 1972, p.2). Influence, in this framing, is not just a desirable outcome—it is a definitional threshold. Without it, an act is unlikely to count. This logic remains influential. The Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), which continues to shape empirical research, asserts that individuals participate if they have the resources, psychological engagement, and opportunities to do so. Barnes and Kaase (1979), building on a behaviouralist tradition, offered a now-canonical distinction between "conventional" and "unconventional" participation. Whether institutional or disruptive, participation remained something that could be done, seen, and ultimately measured. Its absence implied disengagement, marginality, or failure.

But behind this definitional confidence lie a set of normative and epistemological assumptions. First, it assumes that all individuals exist within political systems or social systems that are open to influence, that provide meaningful feedback mechanisms, and that tolerate dissent. Second, it assumes that influence is a universal aspiration—that political acts are by default intended to produce institutional change. These assumptions reflect the liberal democratic context and a quite Eurocentric view in which much of participation theory was born, but they falter when applied to subjects whose political formation has occurred in authoritarian or in-between environments.

This tension becomes more acute when we try to examine why individuals participate at all. Classical explanations have often rested on rationalist foundations. Downs (1957) described participation as a cost–benefit decision, while Olson (1965) theorised the free-rider problem in collective action. Later work reintroduced social context: Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) argued that participation is often triggered by mobilisation, not spontaneous preference. Dalton (2008) pointed to civic norms and generational change. Yet these models, though analytically

diverse, share a common logic: they locate participation within a behavioural economy, driven by opportunity, incentive, or mobilisation.

Crucially, these theories remain ill-equipped to explain why individuals might choose not to act, not because they are uninterested, but because they are cautious. For those socialised under authoritarian regimes, participation is not simply a function of will or capacity. It is shaped by emotional memory, by learned self-censorship, by an embodied understanding that visibility may carry costs. The logic of "rational participation" thus fails to accommodate subjects whose political sensibilities are governed less by preference than by risk calculus. More importantly, emotional acts triggered by a drastic system change or incidents can be ignored.

Equally problematic is the assumption that participation must be institutionally relevant. This has led to a narrowing of what counts. Influence, while useful as a normative goal, is structurally unsuited to capture participation as it unfolds in precarious, distributed, or symbolic forms. Migrants—particularly those with authoritarian pasts—may not seek to influence policy. Their participation may be indirect, affective, or anticipatory. It may take the form of symbolic gestures, strategic silences, or transient digital signals. To require "influence" as a definitional core is to overlook these practices and misrecognise their political weight.

Recent typological expansions have tried to address these limits. Van Deth (2014) proposes a multidimensional framework, distinguishing institutional, non-institutional, expressive, and civic forms. Ekman and Amnå (2012) go further, differentiating between manifest participation (observable behaviour) and latent engagement (interest, reflection, intentional silence). Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) *connective action* model traces how digital media enable individualised, self-narrated political expressions outside formal structures. Yet these frameworks, too, remain tethered to contexts where expression is presumed to be safe and encouraging. They expand form, but often preserve the function: participation is still about doing something that matters, often visibly or directly, often now. Digital participation, for instance, is too often framed in terms of expression and mobilisation in another way with some different characteristics, but rarely theorised for what it conceals, deflects, or forestalls. For migrants embedded in platform-mediated diasporas, where the boundary between private life and public trace collapses, and where the audience may include not only friends but also imagined surveillance or performance field, the act of posting, liking, or even exiting a group becomes fraught with interpretive tension. Here, participation is not always about visibility. It

is frequently about evasion or attitudes. Sometimes, it is about surviving the algorithmic gaze or peer pressures (Dahlgren, 2013).

This is particularly salient in the case of first-generation Chinese migrants in the UK. As my previous work shows (Ma and Cao, 2023), political participation among mainland Chinese system resists standard typologies. In response, I developed a revised model encompassing four modalities: non-participation, tokenism, active participation, and radical participation. This framework aimed to reflect the diversity of positioning strategies rather than behavioural outcomes. Yet even this typology bears traces of what it seeks to critique. It names modes, but does not always account for shifts between them. It describes action, but cannot always interpret hesitation or blurred areas. It offers structure, but does not fully theorise participation as a site of interaction. Indeed, the political meaning of an act often lies not in what it is, but in where, when, and how it is performed—and by whom. Considering the transnational and digital aspects of the life of a migrant adds further layers of complexity. Political engagement is not always framed to shape the realities of the society of settlement. Above all, this constituency is situated within a parallel dual political structure. While one side incentivises participation and dialogue, the other side relentlessly focuses on insistence of devotion. This might respond to some happenings in the country of origin or to some far-off imagined public spheres navigated through diasporic networks. For example, a post on WeChat may indicate allegiance more than authentic belief. Exiting the group may be politically more significant than casting a ballot. Abstaining from participation may be more eloquent than the intent to proclaim. Here, participation does not aim at altering the system; rather, it centres on renegotiating identity.

In this sense, typology can help, but only if it recognises its own fragility. It must accommodate acts that are ambivalent, ambiguous, and aesthetically coded. As Ma and Cao (2023) note, even attending a cultural event may be interpreted differently depending on the audience, platform, and timing. Participation is relational, contingent, and often staged within what Goffman (1974) would call "safe frames." But who defines what is safe? And how do these definitions themselves reflect political histories and affective geographies?

This thesis thus takes a step further. It does not discard typology, but displaces its centrality. It treats political participation not as an observable variable, but as a constitutive field, a space in which identity is practised, suppressed, or tentatively tested. Following Schaffer (1998), participation is read as a form of cultural translation; following Isin (2009), it is framed as a

performative act through which the self is rendered political. Visibility is not assumed; it is negotiated. Action is not always expressive; it is often strategic, encoded, or withheld. This shift, from participation as behaviour to participation as identity-work, requires us to look beneath action, towards affective histories, emotional grammars, and the legacies of governance. Before participation, there is formation. Before voice, there is silence. In what follows, this chapter turns to the socialisation processes that make political speech a calculated risk and strategic silence a learned survival. That is, this chapter turns to authoritarian socialisation.

2.2 Authoritarian Socialisation and the Emotional Grammar of Disengagement

Speaking politically is never simply speaking; it also entails framing, voicing a position, and inviting risks without guarantees of being ignored. Liberal political theory suggests humans tend to participate after liberation. For those socialised under authoritarian regimes, silence isn't absence but a conditioned habit. It's not just a choice but an ingrained response- remaining silent, performing compliance, perceiving self-expression as risky, and viewing political discourse as earned, not automatic.

This outline is not descriptive of a cultural attribute. It is a form of social knowledge constructed systemically—an emotional semantic grammar of withdrawal. It also does not stop at the hard border. Migrants may no longer carry the ideology of the regime they left, but they carry its patterns, its anticipatory cautiousness. What requires scholarly attention is not simply the authoritarian state, but the mutative legacies it imprints on those who have 'moved on.'

2.2.1 Silence as a Socialised Reflex: Institutions, Trust, and Withdrawal

Political participation does not begin with rights, but begins with orientation. And political orientation is learned long before one is handed a ballot. In liberal democracies, civic culture theory has long emphasised the role of efficacy and institutional trust in cultivating participation (Almond and Verba, 1963). Citizens are assumed to develop a sense that political expression is safe, that it matters, and that institutions are open to being influenced. But this presumption fails when applied to those raised in systems where speech was a calculation, not a norm—where visibility could be read, recorded, and sometimes punished.

Authoritarian socialisation is not simply about repression. It is a kind of affective education—a slow formation of instinct. One learns not just what is forbidden, but how to sense when not to speak. Trust, in this setting, becomes interpersonal rather than institutional. As Mishler and Rose (2001) show, post-authoritarian citizens often trust people, not systems. Formal openness may exist, but political communication remains shaped by the memory of asymmetry. Easton's (1975) concept of "diffuse support", a reservoir of system-level trust built over time, simply does not materialise when the state has historically punished dissent.

This learned caution is not limited to China. Studies of Yugoslav refugees in the UK (Korac, 2003) demonstrate that even after resettlement, many continued to avoid political speech, seeing public discourse as a space of sensitivity. Jamal (2009) finds similar effects among Arab migrants, where authoritarian socialisation produces low engagement in destination democracies, despite legal inclusion. In her comparative work on immigrant incorporation, Bloemraad (2006) argues that legal access to citizenship does not equate to felt permission to speak—that rights alone do not unmake fear. But fear is not always loud. It can manifest in quiet, in posture, in knowing when not to ask. In Syria, Wedeen (1999) observed how citizens engaged in what she calls "acting as if"—a kind of ritualised, performative loyalty that relies not on belief, but on rehearsed signs of compliance. The result is not blind obedience, but a repertoire of gestures, deferrals, and ironic distance. James Scott (1990) captures this phenomenon in the language of infrapolitics: the hidden transcripts, the strategic silences, the sideways speech that flourishes beneath the surface of apparent conformity. These are not failures of courage. They are literacies of survival.

Even when individuals migrate away from authoritarian regimes, these grammars persist. Trust does not reattach to new institutions simply because repression has been left behind. As Pharr and Putnam (2000) note, systemic distrust has become an increasingly prominent feature of democratic life more broadly, but for authoritarian migrants, it is often foundational. Mistrust is not a response to broken institutions—it is the residue of having never known a safe one. This is why silence must be read not as a lack of engagement, but as its own mode of political subjectivity—a socialised reflex. It is learned, inherited, and rehearsed. It is not a blank, but a grammar. And it is often the first language authoritarian migrants carry with them into their new political lives.

2.2.2 Not Just China: Comparative Lessons from Other Authoritarian Migrants

Being careful in politics is not a Chinese instinct; rather, it is a disposition acquired by those who have lived under a constraint environment. From one continent to another and even through various languages, authoritarian immigrants not only brought along collective memories of but also their coping mechanisms: precisely measured visibility, disengagement, and the quiet withholding of words until it is safe to do so.

In the post-socialist era, such dispositions are well-documented. Grzymala-Kazlowska (2015) describes Polish migrants in the UK as engaging in "anchoring practices"—efforts to achieve emotional security and moral orientation, often through seeking emotional security and orientation; at times this may involve low-visibility or non-expressive strategies. White (2012), writing on youth migration from Poland, observed that political disengagement among young Poles abroad was less a matter of indifference than of habitual scepticism, a weird sense that formal institutions, whether in Poland or elsewhere, do not truly respond. Among Arab and North African migrants, similar patterns can be observed. Jamal (2008) argues that many migrants from the Middle East bring with them a learned distrust not only of authoritarian states, but of the idea of politics itself. Jamal's work shows how socialisation under centralised states can produce civic repertoires that do not translate straightforwardly into democratic participation after migration. Vickers (2019) examines how migration, class relations, and immigration controls shape the civic and political engagement of migrants in the UK. His analysis shows that structural constraints and socio-economic positioning can limit access to formal participation, often pushing engagement into informal or community-based arenas. While his work does not address North African migrants in southern Europe, Caponio (2005) demonstrates how immigrant associations in Milan, Bologna, and Naples navigate local policy networks, finding that restrictive institutional opportunity structures can constrain their political influence despite active civic presence. Kleist (2008) analyses Somali transnational political mobilisation between Europe and the Horn of Africa, showing how diaspora actors engage in cross-border political processes and community organising rather than focusing primarily on host-country formal institutions. To provide a parallel for West African contexts, Mensah (2014) explores continental African identities in Canada, revealing how racialisation, immigrant status, and transnational commitments intersect to shape political subjectivities, sometimes leading to cautious or selective public engagement when recognition in mainstream politics feels absent. Lindley (2010) investigates the social and economic significance of

remittance-sending among Somali refugees in the UK, highlighting the role of transnational obligations in structuring everyday life. Although not centred on formal political participation, her findings suggest that economic and social priorities can take precedence over engagement in host-country politics, contributing to patterns where public political presence is muted while community-level or transnational involvement remains strong.

These comparative cases are important. They demonstrate how socialisation leaves emotionally authoritarian scars in societies that have transitioned to fragments of states. They show the possibility of absence or deafening silence as something that pauses and waits in new terrains. They show that silence takes on a different form. It is now void of legal meaning. The realm of politics does not offer answers for many who venture into it, and that is illuminating. What emerges is a significantly broader taxonomy of disengagement not treated as failure, but as a form of post-authoritarian scholarly wisdom.

Compared to other authoritarian-origin diasporas, the Chinese case presents a comparatively distinctive configuration, marked by continuity, systematisation, and saturation of ideology. The scale and structure differences are of utmost importance. Numerous regimes occupy this space: post-communist, post-colonial, militarised, where authority was exercised via fragmentation, repression, or patrimonial domination. The defining feature of China's type of authoritarianism is starkly different. It is instead characterised by: continuity, systematisation, and saturation of ideology. It is not merely a disciplining regime. It educates, historicises, and integrates. It does more than censor; it narrates. And those narratives are difficult to untangle even after one leaves (Perry, 2012; Stockmann, 2012; King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; Greitens, 2016). As Perry (2012) shows, the CCP's revolutionary traditions are actively mined and repurposed in political education, embedding ideological loyalty in civic rituals. Stockmann (2012) demonstrates how commercialised media still function as an instrument of political socialisation, shaping citizens' horizons of permissible discourse. King, Pan and Roberts (2013) detail the mechanism of selective censorship, allowing individual criticism but suppressing collective mobilisation, reinforcing the behavioural boundaries learned from early education. Greitens (2016) further situates these practices in a broader apparatus of internal security, where surveillance institutions underpin the everyday calculus of political speech. Furthermore, the influence of the Chinese state's authority is no longer confined to the traditional boundaries of its territory. It transcends physical borders through digital infrastructure, social and cultural networks, and symbolic infrastructure. Unlike typical regimes, it adopts a form of governance

that transcends specific geographical regions: emotional governance beyond territorial boundaries, which embodies emotional bonds, visible spaces, and community expectations that transcend time and national borders.

Many Chinese migrants may choose silence as a form of expression. However, they also embody an internalised framework of political visibility. One that is socialised and sometimes even reinforced by algorithms. Their silence is not merely for self-protection; it is organised, structured, and edited, rather than simply inherited from the Chinese context. This is because they face greater threats and uncertainties than they did in China. From this perspective, China is not lacking in comparability but rather expands the scope of what the "aftermath of authoritarianism" might encompass under conditions of technological continuity and scalability—including in the freer spaces of Western diaspora societies. To understand how this socialisation persists in liberal democratic states, we must examine how platforms mediate the aftermath of state presence.

2.2.3 Beyond Borders: Digital Platforms and the Afterlife of Authoritarian Control

Authoritarian power was once imagined as something fixed in place. You left the country; you left the state behind. The political systems were separate, and so were their emotional atmospheres. But that is now no longer how things work—not for migrants who carry with them not only habits of caution, but the digital architectures that reproduce them.

For many Chinese migrants, the platforms do not offer distance. They offer repetition or a constraint field. WeChat, in particular, does not feel like a public square. It feels like an extension of home state—a curated, crowded, emotionally dense space where personal and political do not stay apart for long. As Beck (2022) observes in her study of Chinese golden visa migrants in Hungary, WeChat is not merely a communication tool; it is a field of moral visibility, where the expectations of the motherland and the diasporic community converge. The pressure to perform belonging does not lessen abroad; it becomes more intricate, because one must now balance multiple audiences at once. This is the problem with the assumption that migration leads to political openness. It might lead to legal freedom, yes. But digital life produces a different set of logics. Messages are saved. Screenshots circulate. Surveillance is no longer always vertical, from state to subject, but horizontal, peer-based, ambient. Silence,

in this context, is not passive. It is a strategy for managing what can no longer be clearly controlled.

Tsourapas (2018) describes such phenomena as part of transnational authoritarianism, where regimes project influence beyond their borders, not only through direct repression, but by cultivating symbolic loyalty and soft pressure within diasporic networks. While his focus is the Middle East, the theoretical architecture fits the Chinese case well. Here too, digital connectivity becomes a double-edged mechanism: migrants maintain cultural proximity, but also internalise political restraint. The state does not need to monitor directly when the interface already encodes memory. In such a space, self-censorship becomes difficult to name. It is not imposed from outside. It lives in the body. Migrants learn to navigate different registers of speech depending on the platform, the imagined audience, and the possibility of return. Participation becomes selective, not only in its content, but also in its location, tone, and emotional range. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) provide a useful conceptual lens here. In their model of simultaneity, they argue that migrants do not simply move between contexts—they inhabit them both at once. This means political subjectivity is not reset by migration. It is restructured across overlapping social fields. In the digital age, these fields are no longer metaphorical. They are spatially real and interface-bound. A Chinese migrant, especially one who is still holding a Chinese passport, in the UK may be physically protected, but digitally entangled in norms of deferential speech learned long ago.

What emerges is not classic censorship, but a quieter form of political attenuation. You say less. Or differently. Or not at all. Not because you are afraid in the usual sense, but because you no longer know who the audience really is or how they might respond. Participation persists but shifts to timing, tone, and recognition—who sees you and what it costs. Digital platforms not only promote caution but also sustain the effect. Silence can indicate loyalty—signalled, not spoken or enforced.

2.2.4 Symbolic Loyalty and the Affective State

Not all forms of political expression aim to persuade an audience. In some cases, it may aim simply to exist. Under authoritarian governments, and within the scope of their transnational influence, loyalty is mechanical and instinctive.

In her analysis of Syrian political theatre, Wedeen (1999) notes how citizens routinely "act as if" they hold beliefs, not as a result of some ideological fidelity, but because the price of non-participation is too costly. These performances are calculated systematically. They capture a regime's capacity to go beyond the brute physical coercion of bodies to structure not only emotions and gestures, but also manipulate the emotion that makes actions feel obligatory. This is power, not in what it forbids, but in what it compels as necessary. Such symbolic habits of carefully crafted loyalty are seldom bound by borders. For authoritarian migrants, the digitally networked surveillance frameworks and transnational social expectations of control sustain the patterns of surveillance. The 'performance of alignment' is not always ideology-driven. Goffman's (1959) contribution to impression management provides a basic framework here: people create specific versions of themselves based on the audience, the context, and the likely feedback they might receive. Identities are not a latent self; they are a presence that is staged and crafted in the moment. Butler (1990) pushes the conversation further. In her theory of performativity, identity does not precede expression—it is forged through it. Identity is not merely enacted in response to norms; it is constituted through repetition. Crucially, repetition here is not habit in the ordinary sense, but the reiterative labour through which identity coheres over time. When loyalty is performed under conditions of opacity and risk, it acquires a particular density—it settles into the body as both shield and script. Even when no clear audience is present, the gesture carries meaning: to remain visible without becoming vulnerable, to appear without being exposed.

Within diasporic digital enclaves, such as Chinese-language WeChat groups abroad, the affective weight of these performances becomes acute. Beck (2022), in her study of Chinese migrants in Hungary, shows how WeChat exceeds its utilitarian function; it emerges as a "space of moral visibility," where emotional gestures, likes, shares, patriotic affirmations, acquire symbolic weight. To post is not just to signal alignment with the homeland; it is to affirm one's inclusion in a moral community, to sustain an intelligible self in the eyes of others. Here, symbolic loyalty circulates not merely as deference to the state, but as a social grammar—performed for friends, family, distant peers, and often, for oneself, in search of coherence amid fractured terrains. This suggests another possible form loyalty could take. In this case, migrants make sacrifices so that collective encapsulation becomes helpful or, to avoid vigilante judgment, narrate approved scripts. These concepts largely inform the elusive question in migrant studies: what constitutes an affective economy?

Ayuval-Davis (2011) situates this within the theme of emotional belonging. "Belonging" as a concept is relational and, most importantly, affective. Regarding the state, and even more so when it travels as memory and relation, it does not need to enforce belief. It animates a field of expectation woven with emotions where loyalty is felt before being rationalised. Those migrants who prefer silence or to echo official lines devoid of conviction often do so not out of allegiance, but as a way of restoring affective balance within overlapping visibility systems. Moreover, Ma and Cao (2023) argue that participation in China may serve as a theatrical performance of alignment legitimacy, where actors participate as a ritual of maintaining civic normality and loyalty. This also exists in diasporic contexts where symbolic loyalty is maintained abroad via emotional links. It operates as a means of preserving emotional coherence in a politically fractured landscape, even virtually.

Loyalty here is neither entirely chosen nor entirely constructed, sitting between memory and strategy, belief and practical necessity. It becomes part of a migrant's everyday reality, shaped by a political atmosphere that can feel both distant and close. From this perspective, identity can also be seen not as something fixed, but as an ongoing, active practice formed in response to past risks, social judgment, and the persistent possibility of absence. The gestures of fear, silence, conditional loyalty, and ambiguous expression do not merely constrain political articulation. Long before identity becomes something one owns or declares, it is rehearsed in minor acts of self-preservation and calibrated expressions of compliance. The figure of the migrant who "reposts without belief" exemplifies this: not a surrender of voice, but a modulation of it. Such memories are not memories of events, but of conditions—of atmospheres under which one's subjectivity was quietly trained, tuned to what can be said, what must be felt, and what might be survived. In this sense, authoritarian socialisation not only suppresses the overt performance of politics; it saturates the affective infrastructure of identity itself.

We are thus returned to the central question: What does it mean to perform identity rather than to have one? The former suggests that identity is not a possession, but a process—a situated choreography of self in response to the demands of visibility, risk, and recognition.

2.3 Performing the Self: Identity, Silence, and Strategic Absence

2.3.1 From Essence to Expression: Rethinking Identity as Practice

What is identity? It is a deceptively simple question, yet one that has produced some of the most enduring and unstable debates in the social sciences. Across disciplines, identity has been described as a thing we have, a category we are placed into, a performance we learn to inhabit. But rarely is it all three at once. And rarely does theory fully account for what it feels like to hold identity in uncertainty, or to negotiate its meaning in silence. Broadly speaking, identity theory has travelled through three major trajectories. The first treats identity as essential: innate, coherent, internally anchored. This view, prevalent in early social psychology and nationalist theory, understands identity as something natural and historically embedded, tied to ethnicity, language, and cultural inheritance (Tajfel, 1981; Smith, 1991). Though largely displaced in critical theory, this essentialist thread continues to shape public discourse, especially in the language of "cultural heritage," "diasporic purity," or "authenticity in belonging."

The second and most popular one is the constructivist approach. Here, identity is seen as socially produced, shaped through categorisation, narrative, institutional contexts, and symbolic boundaries. One becomes what one is named, not what one is born. Identity is not a given, but a consequence of positioning. It emerges through interaction and is always situated (Jenkins, 2004; Fearon, 1999). Hall (1996a) famously argued that identities are not things we have, but positions we occupy. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) further cautioned against treating identity as an explanatory variable, urging instead a focus on "identification" as a category of practice.

A third trajectory—less stabilised but increasingly influential—treats identity as performative. Most closely associated with Butler (1990), this view suggests that identity is not something that precedes action, but is constituted through it. One becomes intelligible by doing. The subject is not revealed through expression; it is produced by it. Performativity theory thus collapses the presumed gap between inner self and outer representation. What matters is not who one is "inside," but what one becomes through repetition, recognition, and legibility. Migration studies, however, have often remained anchored in the first two traditions, rarely engaging the third in any serious way. Identity tends to be treated as something migrants carry and then resolve—either by retaining it, adapting it, or losing it across a path toward integration.

This logic underpins many of the canonical models. Gordon's (1964) theory of assimilation is among the earliest and most influential, premised on a sequential model in which migrants gradually progress through stages of cultural, structural, civic and identificational integration. Though multi-layered in form, the underlying trajectory is linear and unidirectional. Difference is understood as a temporary condition, to be gradually eroded through proximity and time. Cultural practices, linguistic features, and minority solidarities are all assumed to dissolve as migrants move closer to the 'mainstream'. The endpoint is sameness. Identity is complete once its difference disappears.

Berry's (1997) acculturation framework presents a more differentiated schema, proposing four strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation. But this apparent complexity remains structurally bounded. Identity is placed within a pre-defined grid, where "home" and "host" cultures are treated as stable referents. Migrants are expected to navigate their position within this binary logic. While Berry acknowledges choice and agency, the model remains profoundly normative: "integration" is subtly cast as the ideal resolution, a position that maximises both heritage retention and host adaptation. What is obscured is how identity is also shaped by power, fear, and ambivalence, how it is lived not just as balance, but as tension. Alba and Nee (2003) attempt to reassert assimilation theory in a contemporary register. Their neo-assimilationist model argues that with sufficient structural access—especially through education, employment, and intermarriage-migrants will eventually converge normatively with the majority culture. Cultural difference is not problematised, but it is expected to fade. Their emphasis on institutional mediation is important, yet the model retains the assumption that integration culminates in alignment. What remains untheorised is resistance, refusal, or ambivalent presence. Participation is taken as a signal of agreement. Hesitation, or silence, appears as failure.

Even Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory, which explicitly addresses structural inequality, conceptualises identity within a limited set of pathways. Migrants and their children are seen as following one of several trajectories: upward mobility via assimilation into the middle class; downward assimilation into marginalised urban subcultures; or selective acculturation, where economic incorporation occurs alongside cultural retention. This framework is more sensitive to variation in outcomes, particularly across racial and class lines. Yet identity is still imagined as a predictable output of socio-economic position. The model

tells us where migrants might end up, but not how they might feel their way through uncertainty, or how silence itself might be a tactic of positioning.

Within these frameworks, identity is not something that is lived; rather, it is something that is managed. Migrants are not defined as negotiating the present; they are only understood as moving toward an anticipated endpoint. Regardless of whether the endpoint is assimilation, integration, or selective incorporation, the timeline is unidirectional, the reasoning developmental. Engagement becomes the observable indicator of successful advancement, whereas stagnation, whether articulated as silence, non-participation, or ambiguous self-location, is branded as deficiency. Despite their differences, these models have one thing in common: they collapse expression, belonging, and normative alignment into one continuum. To be regarded is to be grasped. To articulate is to fit. To diverge is to fail, or regress.

But such models ignore the fundamental question of what enables expression in the first place. They do not account for power, be it institutional or personal, overt or ambient. They miss the fact that identity is not only powerfully performed and adopted but constrained and fragmented by the conditions that need to be enacted. A migrant may remain silenced not because he is not ready to belong, but because he understands all too well the price he must pay for misrecognition. To silence oneself is also many things: a refusal, a negotiation, a means of preserving a self through unstable terrains of visibility. Additionally, current mainstream identity theorists ignore the blend of ambiguity, improvisation, and strategic obscurity. This process does not aim at finding a clear answer but learning to live with inner conflict and complexity. Sometimes, expressing yourself doesn't mean you've figured things out. It might be about going along, staying safe, or even betraying something.

Then, this thesis tries to reveal a kind of tension. It seriously considers the fact that identity is not a trajectory to be controlled precisely; instead, it is a performance that requires management, contingent, contextual, often in flux, and incomplete. The performative instability is what the next section tries to explain through literature: how identity, both as public projection and private negotiation, is performed in contexts.

2.3.2 Performing in Context: Goffman, Butler, Brubaker

If identity is not a fixed possession, then it must be something that happens. Not all at once, not everywhere the same, but differently—depending on who is watching, what is expected,

and how much can be risked. Migrants do not walk into new societies with a full self ready to be revealed. They learn, moment by moment, what version of the self is viable. And that process is never neutral.

Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation offers a first entry into this dynamic. He understood identity not as essence but as performance—something enacted on a stage, before an audience, under conditions one cannot fully control. In Goffman's framework, the "self" is not a thing we carry within, but a series of impressions we manage depending on setting, audience, and perceived consequence. In this sense, identity is not expressed—it is adjusted. Migrants, especially, learn to scan the room. They decide when to speak, how much to reveal, and what silence might preserve. But where Goffman describes performance as strategic and adaptive, Judith Butler (1990) takes a more radical turn. Her notion of performativity is not just about expression—it is about constitution. Identity, she argues, is produced through the repetition of socially recognisable acts. The subject becomes intelligible not by expressing a pre-existing core, but by citing the norms that allow one to be seen. Identity, in this sense, is not performed as a choice—it is forced into form by the discursive conditions of recognition. This matters profoundly for migrants from authoritarian systems: to be seen as "political" or "apolitical," "loyal" or "dissident," is not simply a matter of what one thinks, but of how one's actions are already read through prevailing codes. Goffman (1959) helps us see how people calibrate behaviour in relation to context; Butler (1990) shows us that the context itself is already shaped by power. But neither fully accounts for the institutional and relational categories that organise that context—this is where Brubaker and Cooper (2000) offer a further refinement. They argue that instead of asking "What is identity?", we should ask how identity is used, invoked, or resisted. Their concern is with "identification", which can be seen as a set of practices, not as a state of being. Identity is what happens when individuals position themselves—or are positioned—within institutional, symbolic, or interpersonal fields. Together, these perspectives help us grasp something crucial: that identity is never enacted in a vacuum. It is performed in relation to expectations, to the audience or to risk. And it is never one-dimensional. Individuals don't simply perform themselves—they navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, affiliations: ethnic, national, professional, digital, and religious. The tension among these affiliations—what Roccas and Brewer (2002) call social identity complexity—is not something to be resolved. It is something to be worked with.

Social identity complexity theory （Roccas and Brewer，2002) helps illuminate why so many migrants appear inconsistent, ambivalent, or even contradictory in their identity performances simultaneously. It is not because they are undecided, but because they are managing multiple identity strands under conflicting pressures. A Chinese migrant in the UK may present themselves as politically disengaged in public, culturally Chinese in family contexts, cautiously cosmopolitan in professional settings, and nationally ambiguous on digital platforms. These aren't contradictions, but calibrations, context-sensitive enactments of belonging and safety. In authoritarian diasporic contexts, such calibrations often take the form of silence, deferral, or strategic ambiguity. The choice not to express a view is not a lack of identity; it is a form of affective self-discipline. One learns when the stakes are too high. One adapts to the ambient atmospheres of mistrust, community surveillance, or platform visibility. Even the digital group chat is not just a tool; it is a space where performance is observed, remembered, sometimes weaponised.

So, the question is not whether migrants are political or apolitical. It is: under what conditions does identity become sayable? When does visibility become viable? When does expression feel safe enough to try? This study takes performance seriously, not as a metaphor, but as a method. Identity, in this view, is not only what people claim. It is what they choose to withhold, how they shift tone across settings, how they play multiple roles at once without collapsing into any single one. It is not a singular act, but a rhythm; sometimes fluent, sometimes fractured, but always responsive. The next section turns more explicitly to those absences, conditions that make identity silent but still exist.

2.3.3 Identity Under Conditions: Expression, Silence, and the Politics of Risk

If dominant identity and integration models expect voice as proof of inclusion, they rarely ask what conditions must exist for voice to feel safe. They assume that to speak is to desire belonging, and to stay silent is either a refusal or a delay. This assumption, so foundational in models like Gordon's (1964) linear assimilation or Berry's (1997) acculturation framework, rests on the belief that identity naturally moves from invisibility to visibility, from hesitation to coherence. It treats silence as a problem to be solved, and participation as evidence that the solution is working. Yet what these models cannot grasp is that visibility is not an option but a cost. That to speak may not always be progress, and to remain silent is not always retreat. The failure lies not with migrants who do not express themselves as expected, but with theoretical

frameworks that demand expression without attending to the terrain it must cross. Migrants do not just live in new countries—they live in overlapping systems of visibility, obligation, memory, and risk. And identity, in such systems, is not expressed; it is negotiated.

Goffman (1959) reminds us that the self is not something one reveals, but something one performs depending on the stage and the audience. Butler (1990) pushes this further—there is no self before performance. One becomes recognisable only through the repetition of socially legible acts. And Brubaker and Cooper (2000) caution us to look not for "identity" as a noun, but for identification as an act. In this light, expression is never free-standing. It is always dependent on power, on recognition, on risk. And silence is not its opposite, but its sibling. A different kind of act, structured by the same conditions. James Scott's (1990) idea of *infrapolitics* gives us a way to talk about those small, often unnoticed acts that happen outside formal visibility—acts that push back without declaring themselves. For many migrants carrying the aftershocks of authoritarian socialisation, this feels familiar: reposting without comment, steering away from political talk, speaking in code. These are not signs of passivity; they are ways of being present while managing the risks of being seen. In a different but related register, Isin (2009) reminds us that citizenship is not just a legal status but something done—through small gestures, refusals, or interruptions that may never be recognised by institutions. In that light, silence is not disappearance. And as Duyvendak (2011) points out, stepping back can be as deliberate as stepping forward. What looks like withdrawal may be a clear-eyed reading of an unwelcoming space, a decision that sometimes survival means not showing up at all.

Together, these perspectives reshape how we think about the expression–silence binary. They reject the idea that speech is a sign of success and silence is a sign of deficit. Instead, they suggest that both are modes of identity work, responsive to shifting thresholds of legibility. The migrant who speaks carefully in one space and avoids another is not incomplete. They are adapting. This has deep implications for how we study participation. We cannot assume that silence is the endpoint of a failed trajectory, or that visibility marks its resolution or success. We must instead ask: what are the conditions under which expression becomes possible? What does silence protect? What is being said in what is not said?

If identity is performed, then silence is not the absence of performance. It is a different kind. Not passive, but situated. Not empty, but deliberate. Not free, but responsive. This is the axis the older models missed. To understand identity under these conditions, we need a different

kind of framework. Not one that asks who speaks and who doesn't, but what makes speaking viable in the first place and what makes speaking acceptable for the surroundings.

2.3.4 From Strategic Self to Situated Model

What this leaves us with is not a fixed self-waiting to be revealed, but a self continually done—held together, refigured, made viable under pressure. Expression and silence are not ends of a spectrum, nor are they moral indicators of integration. They are tactical responses to the complex reality. The existing models are not wrong in asking how migrants relate to society. But they are limited in assuming that relation looks like alignment, that participation looks like agreement, and that identity becomes true only once it becomes visible. These are not just empirical limitations. They are theoretical closures that have blocked our view of what identity can look like under constraint.

The gap, then, is not just in what these models overlook, but in how they think: they ask who belongs, but not how belonging is practised; they measure participation, but not what it costs to participate; they name identity, but not how it is made bearable across shifting conditions of legibility. This study proposes a different route. It begins from performance, not as a metaphor, but as a mechanism. From identity not as essence or outcome, but as a series of acts, silences, recalibrations. It takes seriously the migrant who speaks too carefully, who withdraws too politely, who is too strategic to be counted. It refuses to read ambiguity as absence. And it asks: what would it look like to theorise identity not as a box to be filled or a trait to be measured, but as a situated field of adaptive practice? What kind of framework could help us see expression and non-expression not as opposites, but as coexisting tactics within a shared condition?

2.4 Participation as Ontological Practice

To say that someone participates is to say more than they acted. That is to say, they were seen or recognised. In political theory, this recognition has often been taken for granted—something earned, signalled, or counted. But for those whose identity has always been partial, conflicted, or deferred, participation is not just an act. It is a wager. In earlier sections, we questioned the assumption that political participation is a simple matter of behaviour. We saw how models from Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) to Almond and Verba (1963) define participation as the outcome of resources, motivation, and democratic culture. These models, foundational

though they are, start from the presumption that participation is a sign of civic health. That it expresses who someone already is—a citizen, a member, someone with a stake in the system.

The logic runs deep: participation is the effect of identity. One votes because one feels included. One protests because one sees oneself as a rights-bearing subject. In the migration literature, this logic becomes even more entrenched. Chinese migrants in the UK, for example, are often studied in terms of how little they engage, how silent they appear next to their Indian or Caribbean counterparts (Unterreiner, 2015). When they do not show up in civic records or party registers, their silence is read as disengagement, their ambivalence as failure. Yet what all of this miss is that participation is never neutral as I emphasised at the beginning of this chapter. It is structured—by risk, by memory, by platform design, by ambient norms of who is allowed to speak and who must stay quiet. Migrants do not simply decide whether or not to act. They move through uneven terrains of visibility, recognition, and affective safety. Sometimes participation takes the form of presence. Other times, it looks like absence. But that absence is rarely empty. This is where the existing literature reveals its limits. Most models still treat identity as a psychological or cultural input, and participation as a behavioural output. Even more sociological frameworks like the Political Opportunity Structure (Koopmans et al., 2005) retain this separation: structure offers openings, individuals act within them. What remains untheorised is the space between—the room where subjectivity is tested, adjusted, performed. Schinkel (2013) critiques this logic as a measurement fantasy. He argues that integration policy does not aim to understand migrants, but to categorise them, to measure them through clear labels: employment, language and participation. In this frame, the question is not what migrants are doing, but whether they are doing the right kind of things. Participation, here, is less about presence and more about performative compliance.

This study takes a different view. It asks what participation means when identity itself is unstable—when the subject does not yet know whether they are safe enough to be seen, or coherent enough to speak. It treats participation not as the expression of a settled identity, but as the field in which identity is made and remade. Isin (2009) suggests that citizenship is not a possession but a practice. Acts of citizenship, he writes, are moments of rupture—when someone enters the political not by meeting institutional criteria, but by interrupting them. Migrants often do not "fit" these criteria. Yet they perform their relation to politics all the same: through silence, refusal, selective alignment. In these moments, identity does not precede participation. It emerges through it. Moreover, Yuval-Davis (2011) emphasises that political

belonging is emotional, confidence that one's voice and gestures are understood. For migrants across social fields, state, diaspora, digital, this legitimacy is unstable. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) note that identity is a claim, always context-bound and contestable, and participation is not an outcome of identity.

For Mainland Chinese migrants, influenced by authoritarian culture, Political Participation is not just an act but a site where identity is tested, where the self becomes political through exposure, which varies by race, memory, language, platform, and fear (MacKinnon, 2011). Calling participation ontological means that it is how migrants become visible initially, serving as a terrain for negotiating political identity, often silently and unexpectedly, not merely an expression of belonging but its foundation. What the literature lacks is not just a better behavioural model. It lacks a way to theorise participation when expression is unsafe, when silence is not disengagement but a method, and when identity is something in process. This is the gap. And it is this gap that demands a different framework, one capable of mapping the slow, strategic, sometimes contradictory acts through which migrants position themselves politically.

2.5 Research Gap: Beyond Variable Models, Toward Situated Theorisation

The preceding sections have worked toward a conceptual shift. From identity as a fixed attribute to identity as a series of situated performances. From participation as a behavioural expression to participation as a flexible practice. What this chapter has shown is not merely that migrants participate in different ways, but that the frameworks used to study participation and identity are often structurally misaligned with how subjectivity is formed, constrained, and negotiated in migratory contexts. This final section draws together these insights to identify the theoretical and empirical gaps this study addresses.

2.5.1 From Variables to Structures: The Limits of Behavioural Ontologies

Much of the literature on political participation and migrant integration remains anchored in a variable-based ontology. Identity is treated as an independent or control variable—something possessed, categorised, or measured. Participation, in turn, is reduced to a quantifiable outcome: who votes, who volunteers, who joins civic organisations. Models such as the Civic

Voluntarism Model (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), the Civic Culture approach (Almond and Verba, 1963), and the Political Opportunity Structure framework (Koopmans et al., 2005) all rest on the assumption that participation is the effect of internalised norms, institutional openings, or resource availability.

These models are not wrong in describing visible action. But they fail to interrogate the conditions of recognisability, how participation becomes possible, legible, and meaningful in the first place. They assume that participation expresses pre-defined identity, rather than shaping it. They overlook how risk, fear, or disciplinary memory might contour the very possibility of political subjecthood. As Schinkel (2013) argues, such models do not describe migrants; they describe what states want to see in migrants. Participation, in this view, becomes less a space of practice and more a tool of surveillance. What is missing, then, is a structural ontology—one that does not reduce politics to behaviour but treats it as a field in which identity is formed, fractured, and strategically negotiated.

2.5.2 From Capacity to Condition: Expression as Structured Possibility

A second limitation lies in how expression is understood. Most integration and participation models assume that migrants either can or cannot participate, depending on their resources, capacities, or orientations. Non-participation is read as a lack of confidence, of access, of civic culture. But this binary ignores a deeper structure. Expression is not merely a matter of capacity; it is a matter of condition or psychological willingness. As the previous sections have shown, the ability to act politically is shaped by affective atmospheres, platform architecture, social field, and the embedded memories of risk. To express oneself is not to signal integration. It is to test what is sayable, and at what cost.

In authoritarian migrant diasporas, this becomes particularly acute. Studies have shown that first-generation Chinese migrants often self-censor in public and digital spaces, not only due to fear of state surveillance, but also due to community discipline and the internalised logics of authoritarian socialisation (Sun and Yu, 2022; MacKinnon, 2011). Yet most models lack the conceptual ability to distinguish strategic silence from apathy or indifference. The results may misinterpret cautious migrants' complex adjustments as apathy and apolitical.

2.5.3 First-Generation Mainland Chinese Migrants in the UK: An Empirical Silence

The theoretical gaps outlined above are mirrored by a striking empirical silence in research on first-generation mainland Chinese migrants in the UK. While "British Chinese" has become an increasingly visible category within migration and ethnic studies, much of the scholarship focuses on UK-born second-generation youth (Parker, 1995; Yeh, 2014), Hong Kong and Taiwanese migrants (Parker, 1998; Song, 1997), or highly skilled professionals and entrepreneurs (Yao, 2012). Few studies have focused specifically on those who migrated from mainland China in adulthood—often for work, marriage, or family reunification—carrying with them the political socialisation and affective legacies of life under the People's Republic of China.

This conflation of heterogeneous Chinese identities has created both analytical and empirical problems. While digital technologies have opened up new discursive spaces for British Chinese communities, these developments have not closed the empirical gap around first-generation mainland migrants. For instance, Parker and Song (2007) highlight how the emergence of Chinese-language websites in the early internet era created virtual spaces for identity articulation, social connectivity, and even political mobilisation. Their work shows the outlines of a British Chinese public sphere beginning to form online. Yet they also acknowledge the conceptual ambiguity of "British Chinese" as a category, contested and multiply interpreted. Crucially, their research does not distinguish between British-born Chinese and first-generation migrants from the mainland, a conflation that obscures how different socialisation trajectories shape political expression and silencing. More recent studies have begun to disaggregate Chinese migrant sub-groups, but most of this work has focused on Chinese international students and highly skilled professionals. Li and Zhu (2013), for example, show that international students often adopt a fluid transnational identity, navigating multiple cultural and linguistic spaces while resisting singular alignment with either Britain or China. Similarly, Yao (2012) finds that highly skilled migrants maintain dual or hybrid identities, switching between Chinese cultural attachment, state-oriented national loyalty, and British civic assimilation depending on context. These studies are important, but they remain largely confined to elite, mobile populations. Moreover, even within this research, identity is often typologised into fixed categories without attending to the affective and strategic ambiguity through which identification is enacted. The everyday political positioning of first-generation,

non-elite mainland Chinese migrants, those not neatly fitting into either professional or student pathways, remains empirically marginal and theoretically undertheorized. It is precisely the area that this study addresses.

On the one hand, the dominant frameworks used to understand Chinese political incorporation in the UK often fail to disaggregate between region of origin, generation, or citizenship status (Zhang, 2022). On the other hand, the voices of those who have experienced direct authoritarian socialisation in mainland China, particularly in relation to participation, silence, or strategic withdrawal, have been systematically under-researched. Where political participation is addressed, studies tend to focus on visible and institutional forms: voting, party affiliation, or community leadership (Zhang, 2022). However, these forms of engagement often exclude new or precarious migrants, especially those without stable immigration status or with limited access to electoral participation. As Zhang (2022) argues, symbolic political representation, such as the presence of Chinese-origin MPs, does not necessarily translate into meaningful engagement or inclusion for first-generation mainlanders. Furthermore, empirical studies have yet to fully examine the affective, strategic, and relational dimensions of how such migrants navigate politics in everyday life. Work by Wu (2015) on the connections between students and overseas Chinese networks in Nottingham remains descriptive mainly. The deeper questions, how do individuals carry political fear across borders? How is silence maintained or adapted in liberal democratic contexts? — remain open.

This study addresses that absence directly. By focusing on first-generation migrants from mainland China, individuals who arrived in the UK as adults, after being socialised in an authoritarian context, it opens a space for empirical and theoretical inquiry into how political identity is performed, avoided, and recalibrated. This group is neither a statistical minority nor an ideological outlier. They are simply misunderstood, analytically flattened under a generic "Chinese" label or "Chinessness" imaginations. This thesis insists on their specificity, not only as a demographic, but as a theoretical interlocutor for rethinking how identity, participation, and silence are configured in migratory life within an in-between space.

2.5.4 No Framework for Strategic Identity Configurations

The final theoretical gap lies in the lack of a structural framework for explaining heterogeneous configurations of identity and participation. Even when participation is recognised as complex, existing typologies tend to categorise migrants into static roles: being engaged vs. disengaged,

assimilated vs. separate (Berry, 1997; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Alba and Nee, 2003), without considering how these roles are fluid, situated, and strategically maintained. There are no established frameworks that explain how a migrant can be highly expressive but poorly integrated, or deeply embedded but deliberately silent (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Anthias, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Without such a framework, we cannot make sense of the ways migrants position themselves across contexts, not only in terms of what they do, but in terms of how they regulate who they are seen to be.

This study addresses that gap through the construction of a two-axis approach of identity practice: one axis mapping the degree of expression, the other the degree of integration. This framework does not aim to sort people into clean categories. It seeks to trace the relational, affective, and strategic practices through which identity is interacted and constructed, sometimes loudly, sometimes softly, sometimes not at all.

2.5.5 From Fragmented Critique to Situated Theorisation

Taken together, these gaps represent more than just an academic oversight. They highlight a fundamental disconnect between theory and experience. The existing literature describes political participation as something people engage in when they are prepared to be seen and assumes that people have natural-born agency to participate at certain moments. This study, however, starts with those who are not yet ready or unsure if they want to be visible at all. It suggests that political participation should be theorised not only as an action but also as a site of identity formation under pressure. Visibility is not the goal but a condition that individuals must navigate. Furthermore, silence is not merely a void but could serve as a mode of expression on different terms.

To achieve this, we need a framework or explanatory pathway that acknowledges the complexity of the migrant experience, recognising that identity is not prior to action but something that is produced or co-constructed through participation or engagement, whether visible or not. This will be explored in Chapter 3, which will systematically examine the relationship between identity and political participation.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework: Identity as Situated and Regulated through Participation

3.1 Philosophical Commitments and Methodological Orientation

The preceding chapters have made clear that the relationship between political participation and identity cannot be adequately understood through linear, sequential, or causal frameworks. As the critical review in chapter 2 demonstrated, dominant behavioural models presume that identity precedes action, and that participation flows from pre-existing dispositions or civic orientations (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Almond and Verba, 1963). Yet such assumptions collapse under the weight of lived practice. Identity, far from being stable or prior, is continuously shaped, recalibrated, and in many cases, performatively enacted through participation itself. Moreover, these are neither consolidated nor easily measurable. They may become visible through ambiguity, strategic silence, performance, and symbolic actions—all of which resist the conventional assumptions.

Indeed, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000) pointed out before, identity is not a bounded possession but a process of identification and contextualisation. This makes the link between participation and identity not a matter of empirical causation but of ontological entanglement. To speak of mutual constitution or construction, as this thesis does, is not just to imply a simple feedback loop. Rather, it is to acknowledge the possible recursive, spiral-like structure in which political expression and subjectivity are co-constructed across time, space, and social field (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Such complexity demands a philosophical reorientation. We must move beyond the metrics of "who acts and why" and toward a more foundational inquiry: under what conditions does action become intelligible as political, and how is identity both formed and fractured in the act of becoming visible?

This chapter, therefore, offers a philosophical and methodological groundwork for the analysis. It outlines a constructivist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology, and an inductive theory-developing methodological orientation. With these foundations, an analytical lens will be created to trace acts of identity regulation as they emerge through participation and the effects they bring to political participation.

3.1.1 Constructivist Ontology: Identity as Situated and Emergent

What does it mean to say that identity is constructed? The term has travelled widely—sometimes too lightly—in contemporary social theory. Yet in the context of this study, constructivism is not an intellectual preference. It is a necessary philosophical stance in response to a conceptual impasse: the failure of essentialist and behaviourist frameworks to account for the instability, ambiguity, and contextual volatility of migrant political identity.

A constructivist ontology begins with a refusal—it does not accept that identity exists prior to relation. It assumes instead that the subject is produced through social process: through discourse, interaction, historically embedded systems of classification and expectation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984). Identity is not an interior truth to be uncovered, nor an inherited category to be measured. It is relational and emergent. Hall (1996a) also argues that identity is not a fact, but an unfinished and located production. This becomes particularly salient in migrants' lives, where the context is never singular but interactive and multi-layered. First-generation mainland Chinese migrants in the UK are not simply negotiating between two cultures. They are navigating across different systems of understanding or clarity: the transnational influence of authoritarian formation, the multicultural system of conditional visibility, and the affective and controlled architectures of transnational and in-between digital space. In such conditions, identity does not precede practice.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) remind us that identity, when treated as a fixed attribute, becomes analytically redundant. What matters is the ongoing work of identification, the context-sensitive positioning of self in fields of constraint and expectation. Similarly, Giddens (1984) argues that social actors are embedded in recursive structures that both shape and are reshaped by practice. Identity, on this view, is not pre-political. It is a structured, strategic process of becoming conditioned by power, animated by memory, and constantly reminded in relation to risk.

To adopt a constructivist ontology, then, is to reject the dedicated arts of categorical closure. It may have a typology, but not a fixed allocation mechanism.

3.1.2 Interpretivist Epistemology: Meaning through Situated Participation

If identity is not a possession but a situated and emergent becoming, as the constructivist ontology in the previous section has argued, then the task is not simply to trace its form, but to attend to how that form becomes meaningful in context. This is where ontology folds into epistemology. To view identity as relational means we cannot assume its meaning in advance, nor can we observe it as if from nowhere. It must be interpreted from within the situation or context in which it appears, through the eyes of those who live it, manage it, and sometimes hide it. The meaning of political is not self-evident. It has to be interpreted as a political act. Or sometimes it is defined as a form of political participation; however, its political meanings have to be revealed by participants themselves instead of scholars redefining assumptions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Wedeen, 2009).

Interpretivism refuses to imagine that social facts exist "out there," waiting to be observed. It holds that they are brought into being through the act of interpretation itself (Schutz, 1967; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Meaning is not discovered; it is constructed through positioning, narrative and shared assumptions. This is especially crucial when the subject under analysis is already operating under conditions of semi-visibility or is living in a kind of in-between space. First-generation mainland Chinese migrants, as earlier chapters showed, do not merely act. They craft their acts—visibly here, invisibly there, symbolically elsewhere. What is political is not always what is obvious. What is meaningful may not be intended at all. Studying phenomena through fixed variables, such as voting frequency, associations, and attitudes, is inadequate and epistemologically risky. It forces subjects into terms they didn't choose. As Geertz (1973) suggests, what matters is not behaviour but the webs of significance surrounding it. Meaning arises in interpretation, which is always contextual. This isn't relativism, but careful attention to layered meanings beyond form, respecting hesitations, and viewing digital silence as a form of speech for safety. The interpretivist approach isn't gentle but precise, refusing to simplify the world into patterns that don't fit precisely well.

This study asks not what participation is, but what it becomes through constrained expressions, navigating between what can and must be said, and treating identity as a process of negotiation and the interaction between identity and political participation as an interpretable co-constructive process.

3.1.3 Inductive Reasoning and the Refusal of Variable-Causal Models

Adopting a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology typically rejects variable-based explanation because variables flatten and anticipate meaning, encoding assumptions before engaging with the field. For subjects like Mainland China-origin migrants, with complicated identities, this approach is limiting and sometimes problematic.

Inductive reasoning offers no such certainty. It proceeds not by testing hypotheses against the world, but by letting the world push back against what we think we know. It begins not with a model, but with a question: what is happening here that existing theory cannot explain? In this study, the goal is not to verify pre-defined relationships between "identity" and "participation" as if they were discrete and observable objects. It aims to explore how the two emerge, interact, and occasionally co-create each other in ways that are deeply contextual and often nonlinear. (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). This is why the study adopts a theory-generating rather than theory-testing logic. It is not a retreat from rigour. On the contrary, it is a commitment to conceptual discipline in the face of complexity. Grounded theorists such as Charmaz (2006) have long argued that meaning in social life is constructed through interaction, not deduction, and that theory must be grown from data, not imposed on it; if it is to remain faithful to context. Although this thesis does not apply grounded theory as a research method, it appreciates the logic of grounded school.

In the case of politically ambivalent or digitally displaced subjectivities, that context is not always visible in action. It must be read in silence, in hesitation, in the moments that do not declare themselves as political. This requires the researcher to visit the field, act as a detective to uncover details, and scrutinise evidence in order to draw up a blueprint. This demands not a testable model, but a lens. Not an equation, but a logic of pattern and positioning. The methodological framework that follows—rooted in qualitative interviewing, visual elicitation, and reflexive thematic analysis—does not seek to explain what identity is, but how identity performs and negotiates with and in political participation.

3.2 Identity as Situated Regulation: Four Dimensions of Practice

Participation helps constitute identity, which is never stable but always in motion. This raises questions about regulating the self—responding to others or anticipating recognition and risk. Identity is not only created but also managed and performed. This section proposes four

interlocking dimensions through which identity can be understood as a situated regulatory practice. These theories do not tell us what the identity is, but implicitly function: how it behaves, how it shifts, how it holds together under different conditions. It is here that complexity becomes a method, not a problem.

Following Roccas and Brewer's (2002) model of social identity complexity, identity will be treated not as a single layer but as an intersecting system, often in tension with one another. But tension alone is not enough to explain how people move—how they reposition, retract, or perform. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical frame, Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, and Yuval-Davis's (2011) analysis of situated belonging offer tools to think not only about what identities are, but how they are situated in specific contexts, across time. Together, these perspectives suggest that identity is not simply variable, but a concept that requires interpretation.

The subsections that follow develop four such dimensions: complexity, performativity, positionality, and agency. They do not describe types of people. They map the mechanics of identity in motion.

3.2.1 Fractured Selves: Social Identity Complexity and Multiplicity

Most theories of identity begin with a basic precondition: that we understand who we are by locating ourselves within a clear category. This is the starting point of Social Identity Theory (SIT), which argues that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships, and that these affiliations shape how people perceive themselves and relate to others (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). SIT offers a powerful way of explaining intergroup behaviour, but its design is inherently categorical. It is structured around boundaries, around collectives. It does not account well for the internal dynamics of individuals.

For people who live between systems, such as first-generation Chinese migrants in the UK, this logic runs into trouble very quickly. Their identities do not follow clean lines. They overlap, shift, recede, and re-emerge depending on context: on place, audience, and the kinds of risk involved. One might act British in the office, retreat into a regional Chinese identity online, and avoid national identification altogether in moments shaped by surveillance or political uncertainty. This is not indecision. It is a negotiation, a way of living across multiple systems of expectation, without fully collapsing into any one of them. Social Identity Complexity

Theory (SICT), developed by Roccas and Brewer (2002), is important here, not because it solves the problem, but because it names it. It acknowledges that people may carry multiple self-definitions at once, and that these identities are not stable, but activated differently in different situations. This emphasis on contextual variation is perhaps SICT's most important insight. It helps us move away from identity as some internal or pre-defined truth, or as a clean boundary-making mechanism, and towards a more relational understanding.

However, the model's own architecture moves toward categorisation. Roccas and Brewer (2002) propose four types: intersection, where overlapping identities combine into a narrower self-definition; dominance, where one identity takes priority over others; compartmentalisation, where identities are activated separately in different domains; and merger, where identities are blended into a broader, inclusive whole. These are conceptually clear, but they presuppose a kind of internal consistency that the data in this project does not support. The migrants I interviewed do not move neatly between modes. Their identity work is often messy, reactive and even contradictory—not because they are incoherent, but because they are navigating quite complex and structurally different fields (Verkuyten, 2004; Amiot et al., 2007). For that reason, I do not treat SICT as a fixed explanatory framework but use it more as an analytic lens, which means that I treat SICT as one of the foundations for this research, as it offers a way of analysing identity as layered, conditional, and context sensitive. However, I will not use the four identity formation types proposed by SICT. I take seriously Roccas and Brewer's (2002) argument that people position themselves differently across social fields, yet I question whether their four-dimensional typology captures what I have seen in practice. My concern is less about placing participants into a fixed identity type than about tracing how these positions take shape in response to real pressures.

From this angle, complexity is not a flaw in the account. At times, tension opens a way to act; at other times, ambiguity simply becomes the place where a person stays. What might seem like a fractured self can instead be a deliberate adjustment, a way for migrants to keep going in contexts where stability is rare and where keeping still may not be an option at all.

3.2.2 Performativity under Surveillance: Expression as Regulation

Not all expression is self-expression. This is something we often forget in liberal contexts, where "authenticity" is assumed to be both desirable and accessible. But for many first-generation Chinese migrants, expression is not about self-revelation, but about navigating

carefully, reflexively, and strategically. The question is rarely "What do I want to say?" but rather "What will happen if I say it?" And sometimes: "What will they think I meant, even if I didn't say it that way?"

If 3.2.1 showed that identity is complex and situated, then 3.2.2 asks: how is that complexity made present—or made to disappear—through acts of speech, silence, performance? Expression here is never neutral. It unfolds within uneven structures of power. In such an environment, too much clarity can be dangerous, and too little can be read as refusal or indifference. Identity, from this perspective, is a product of balanced consideration and calibration. Goffman (1959) gave us the idea of social life as performance. He argues that life is a theatre. There are frontstage and backstage, impression management, and the self is the actor. Performance on the frontstage and backstage can be different due to the variations of audiences and contexts. But in migratory contexts marked by institutional scrutiny and digital traceability, there often is no backstage. Or if there is, it's never quite closed. One performs at work, but also on WeChat. One codes their identity in a visa application, then decodes it again at dinner. The stage is continuous, and the audience unpredictable. Butler (1990) pushes this further. Identity, for her, is not expressed—it is produced through the repetition of social scripts. There is no essential self waiting behind the act. Moreover, the act, repeated under constraint, becomes the self or part of the self. Besides, that repetition isn't free. Migrants do not just say who they are. They repeat, with care to risk, what is permissible in the eyes of the state, the employer, the host society and the home society. To remain legible, they must be recognisable. To remain safe, they must not be too fully known.

Scott (1990) offers a related observation. In settings where power is uneven, what looks like agreement can sometimes carry a second layer of meaning, a "hidden transcript" of resistance, or simply a deliberate ambiguity. This is not the kind of open defiance that attracts attention. More often, it is a matter of adjusting tone, choosing a moment carefully, or allowing a pause to speak for itself. In one interview, a participant described smiling and nodding during a workplace meeting while privately disagreeing with every point raised. Such gestures were not signs of passivity; they were ways to prevent her words from being twisted and to get recognition. In these situations, silence can work as a tactic, and sometimes as a form of quiet judgment. So, when a participant reposts an article without comment, or avoids taking part in a political question discussion, or says "I don't care about politics" in a tone that sounds more like a kind of bitterness than indifference, these are not refusals of identity. They are

performances to meet the expectations of different stakeholders. Performativity, in this context, is how identity survives in situations of uncertainty.

3.2.3 Positional Belonging: Identity through Dialogical Otherness

Belonging is often described as a feeling. However, in reality, it is defined by categories, labels, and prejudices. One must get recognition first and be allocated into positions before obtaining a feeling of belonging in society.

Stuart Hall (1996a) argues that identity isn't about uncovering a core, inner self. Instead, it involves identifying a position within discourse where individuals are recognised, labelled, and made understandable through pre-existing systems of meaning. We must accept that our sense of self is partly shaped by the messages we receive about who we are. Therefore, belonging is not an innate feeling but a relational, partial, and often unequal constructed experience. For migrants, especially those who arrive from authoritarian contexts into liberal democracies, this orchestration is rarely neutral. A Chinese accent can imply foreignness. A long visa status may signal alienation. These interpretations do not arise from the self or inner reflection. They come from the social fields—workplaces, immigration systems, neighbourhoods, and digital spaces (public opinions). You are not British because you declare it. You are British when someone stops asking or the society recognises that you can be called British.

Yuval-Davis (2011) argues that belonging can be seen from both emotional and political perspectives. The nation, race, gender, legal status and interactions with surroundings can shape belonging. What this means is that positionality cannot be escaped, but can only be negotiated. Migrants may be associated with certain labels, "British Chinese," "professional," "parent", not because these identities feel whole, but because they provide an intangible legibility. Others may refuse positioning altogether, choosing ambiguity, silence, or refusal as ways of stepping sideways from unwanted frames. But even this refusal is made by oneself, not to position oneself is often to be positioned in another way.

3.2.4 Strategic Agency: Navigating Constraint, Not Enacting Freedom

Although belongings are shaped by positions and structures, individuals also have agency. Agency is not complete freedom of choice, nor is it the ability to exceed the structure, but it is still important for us to consider it when analysing identity. For first-generation mainland

Chinese migrants navigating the tensions between authoritarian memory, liberal expectation, and diasporic visibility, agency is the capacity to reposition oneself within the complex but structured environment. It is not the opposite of being shaped; it is how one adjusts while being shaped.

Bourdieu (1990) argues that what appears to be a decision is often habitus—a learned, embodied sense of what is appropriate, possible, or dangerous, formed over time through socialisation. But habitus is not passive reproduction. It carries the memory of constraint, yes, but also of prior acts of improvisation. In this way, even predisposed gestures—deferral, silence, performative agreement—can become spaces of agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) offer a more dynamic frame: agency is not a possession, but a temporally embedded process. It involves the iteration of past patterns, the projection of imagined futures, and the practical evaluation of what is possible now. A migrant deciding whether to speak Mandarin or English in a particular space is not just expressing identity. They are projecting consequences. They are deciding what version of the self is the most appropriate to be seen.

But agency is not only about choice under constraint. It is the mechanism of identity regulation. This is what makes it central to this framework. Identity is not simply held or expressed; it is enacted through acts of modulation—shifts in actions. Agency allows a migrant to move between being a "professional" in one space, a "parent" in another, and politically invisible otherwise, without accumulating these labels or anticipations into a singular self. As Mahmood (2005) argues, even practices of compliance can hold within them a logic of negotiation. One need not reject a category to rework it. One need not speak loudly to act. So, identity is not merely shaped by structure. It is also practised in the interstices between positions. A subject can adjust, deflect or delay the influence of structures and constraints through agency. Agency, in this sense, is a mechanism that allows one to negotiate and make certain choices to regulate identities.

Looking back at these four dimensions, I am not trying to suggest identity has one fixed structure. Actually, it's the opposite. A person does not start with identity and then enter the world. The subject moves through places, people, risks and social norms, and something gets adjusted, held back, or said. In sum, Social Identity Complexity theory（Roccas and Brewer, 2002）shows that identity is rarely singular. Performativity (Goffman, 1959) reminds us that even when we speak, we are not always saying what we want—we say what we can.

Positionality makes it clear that not all choices are ours; sometimes the world has already called us something before we can answer. However, agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), maybe the hardest part, is how we still move anyway with complexity, but we learn how to live inside it wisely and actively. But even all these concepts together are still abstract. In real life, identity does not just "exist." It shifts. And these movements, minor, sometimes almost invisible, are what we need to understand. So now, instead of asking what identity is, maybe we need to ask: where does it move? What directions are even possible? The next section will try to answer this. Not with a fixed model, but with a map—not to classify people, but to see how they navigate their complex realities.

3.3 Mapping Identity Regulation: Axes, Topologies, and Movement

I have talked about identity as something that is not fixed, but always moving, adjusting. But just saying it moves is not enough. We need to ask: where does it move? Is it random? Or are there some patterns, some directions? People don't make decisions in the air. They are deciding under pressure socially, emotionally and sometimes politically. So even when it looks like someone is just "being themselves," they might also be calculating.

In this chapter, I try to build a kind of map, like a way to see how identity behaves when people are trying to stay safe, or be understood, or avoid something unclear or risky. It is not a fine typology. I am not putting people into boxes and labelling them as what I criticised before. It is more like a field with tensions and directions. Some people move toward more visibility. Some move away. Some try to integrate, others choose segregation. Many do both at the same time, but in different spaces. This map is not a conventional "scientific" map. It is more like a toolbox or a lens. It helps me understand why some migrants choose to remain silent, why others speak in some places but not others, and why someone can feel they belong in one moment and lost in the next. The point is not to measure identity, but to see how it is managed. Moreover, this can serve as a foundation for us to explore whether this management empowers political participation.

3.3.1 From Typology to Topology: Theorising Flow, Not Classification

We have to admit that clear and precise categories can make people feel safer, because they make things feel more manageable. For many of us, 'being manageable' is a privilege instead of a drawback. In migration studies, terms like "active participants," "cultural adapters,"

"disengaged," or "strategically silent" are popular. Sometimes, these ideal types can be useful. But I began to realise they also do something else—they reduce people. They ask us to choose one name when most people are doing different things, in different places, for different reasons.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) warned that identity is often used too easily, as a label, as a group name or a way to assign people to boxes. But identity is not always like that. It does not stay still. Especially not for migrants, whose self-positioning often changes across space, audience, emotion, and risk as I have discussed previously. The frequent changes can create a messy and unclear space for negotiation. So, instead of using a typology, this thesis tries to propose a topological approach which is not a fixed model, but a flexible one. Not "who is who," but how people move between positions—how they shift, stretch, avoid, or negotiate tensions between belonging and standing apart. As Cresswell (1996) writes, space is not just where things happen but shapes what can happen, and how people appear within it.

The idea here is not to classify migrants. It is to see how identities are regulated and arranged across a spectrum of discursive, emotional, and political spaces. As we have noticed in previous chapters (Yuval-Davis, 2011), we can think of belonging not as a fixed status, but as a location within overlapping axes of power and recognition. This is why mapping identity is more meaningful than defining identity. A person may not say much, but the fact that they stay silent in one room and speak freely in another tells us something. Not about who they are, but about what they are managing. Mapping helps us understand these shifts, not to classify, but to trace. The question is, how can we draw this map?

3.3.2 Two Analytical Axes: Expression and Integration

Any attempt to map how identity is regulated under structural constraint requires a conceptual space in which tensions become legible. The current framework here builds on two analytical axes, expression and integration, each capturing a distinct yet overlapping dimension of identity negotiation. This map is constructed through a synthesis of concepts across disciplines.

Expression involves or implies strategies to anticipate consequences and refers to the degree to which identity becomes visible in public or semi-public contexts. The roots of this axis have clear theoretical foundations. Butler's (1990) notion of performativity underscores the idea that identity is not expressed but constituted through repetition within normative fields of intelligibility. Goffman (1959) emphasises the performativity of self-presentation, where

expression always targets an imagined audience. Scott (1990) further explains that silence or other coded behaviours must be understood as part of a "hidden transcript," where unspeakable content can still be important. Taken together, these origins suggest that expression is contingent, conditioned, and often strategically incomplete. It does not reflect identity as a precise product but performs its acceptable appearance within a field of uncertainties.

Integration, by contrast, concerns the structural and discursive positioning of migrants within host societies. Rather than treating it as a linear process or a normative goal, as many assimilationist models tend to do, integration is conceptualised here as a field of conditional recognition. Yuval-Davis (2011) distinguishes between social location, identification, and emotional attachment within her model of belonging. This framework allows for a separation between feeling integrated and being placed in an integrative position by institutions. Anthias (2002) further deconstructs the concept by introducing *translocational positionality*, which highlights that migrants' place within social hierarchies is always intersectional and context-dependent, shaped by race, gender, class, mobility history and more. Thus, integration in this framework is not a measure of the frequencies of civic participation or linguistic fluency. It is a structure of being permitted—how far one is allowed to enter institutional, emotional, or symbolic spaces of the host society. It is externally negotiated, often provisionally, and never guaranteed by individual adaptation alone.

The intersection of these two axes, visibility from the internal side and permission from the external, generates a conceptual map not of types, but of movements. Expression may increase without integration; integration may deepen alongside strategic silence. This is not a quadrant model, but a topology of shifting positionings. Although the resulting conceptual space may appear quadratic in form, two intersecting axes producing four fields, it does not operate as a typology or a set of categories. Rather, it offers a topological field of strategic positioning, in which identity regulation unfolds as a series of movements. These movements are not fixed states, but modulations, ways of navigating what can be expressed, and how far one is permitted to belong. The four regions that emerge do not represent types of people. They represent conditions of identity practice, often held temporarily, sometimes simultaneously, and always within tension.

3.3.3 Strategic Positioning and Identity Movement

As mentioned above, when the two axes, expression and integration, cross. It creates a field where identity is not fixed but held. It emerges that there are not four boxes, but four kinds of negotiation. More like directions where the body, language, and silence operate under constraint. Still, these directions need names. Not because naming makes them true, but because without names, we cannot read their tension. These are not names of people. They are names of conditions. These names are just an attempt to describe instead of a definition.

Table 1 Integration-Expression Matrix

	Low Integration	**High Integration**
High Expression	*Precarious Visibility*	*Assertive Belonging*
Low Expression	*Silent Margin*	*Strategic Withdrawal*

The region of low integration and high expression has been named *precarious visibility,* which refers to the condition that when one speaks, it is not fully received. When the voice sounds before it is secured. To show oneself, but not be sure of what that showing brings. The name carries its own weight, *precarious*, because visibility here is both presence and risk.

The Strategic Withdrawal is the combination of high integration and low expression. When one has rooms in the host society, but chooses to be quiet. The doors are open, at least partly. But the speaking does not follow. The withdrawal is not an absence. It is a kind of precise calculation. Assertive Belonging contains high integration and high expression features. When voice and recognition meet, a person can speak and be heard. It sounds like stability and maybe it is. Here, assertiveness is not arrogance, but a natural maintenance or position. The low-low configuration of Silent Margin implies that neither voice nor welcome lives. Where presence is minimal or kept outside. Not excluded with force, perhaps, but left without a clear door. The margin may not be blank, but full of waiting, retreat, and sometimes refusal. It is not the edge of identity. It is its quietest survival.

These names are not categories. They are not meant to mark people, or to describe stable types. They are concepts shaped by tension—by how expression and integration may combine, at different intensities, in different moments, for different purposes. The quadrant itself does not

imply discrete identities. It describes combinations of strategic responses. A person may move between fields. They may occupy more than one at once. The borders are not walls. They are lines of conceptual contrast. These named quadrants here are to facilitate understanding of this thesis' theoretical framework instead of verifying these in the empirical chapters. The findings based on this starting point presented in later chapters can be more complicated but convincing. Also crucially, the axes are not variables. Expression and integration are not scales to be measured. The difference between "low" and "high" on either axis is not mathematical. It is structural, situational, and fundamentally unquantifiable. Same level of expression can be either "low" or "high" in different contexts.

3.4 Participation as Identity Practice: Meanings, Tensions, and Functions

As mentioned above, this chapter begins not with what people do, but with what they negotiate by doing. Political participation, in many accounts, is treated as an outcome—a behaviour to be counted, a signal of democratic health, a marker of civic success (Ma and Cao, 2023). But participation is rarely neutral, and it is never only an action. It is a form of positioning. For migrants shaped by authoritarian pasts and entering liberal spaces that are not always welcoming, participation is not simply access. The question is not only who participates, but how, where, and at what cost. And even more: what kind of self becomes possible or impossible in the process of participation?

This chapter not only asks what participation means in general. It asks what it does to identity. And what identity must do through it. The framework developed here treats participation not as the expression of political preferences, but as a mechanism for regulating visibility, managing integration, and negotiating positionality. Participation, in this sense, is practice under tension in front of multiple audiences in diverse contexts.

3.4.1 Expanding the Concept: From Voting to Silence

Despite decades of refinement, the concept of political participation remains entangled in a structural paradox. On the one hand, liberal democratic theory demands its expansion beyond voting, institutional interaction, and party membership. On the other hand, measurement models and comparative surveys still privilege what is seen and align with formal political

procedures (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Van Deth, 2014). This tension is particularly acute in migrant studies. Most scholars will take the assumption that migrants can learn and be familiar with the political culture of the host society for granted.

In response to this epistemological and political mismatch, this section proposes a seven-dimensional framework of political participation. It does not reject existing typologies but tries to reposition political behaviours in both societies within a visible and accessible space. These dimensions—grounded in the typological evolutions of Verba et al. (1995), Ekman and Amnå (2012), and Ma and Cao (2023)—are not mutually exclusive; rather, they constitute interlocking spaces where political meaning is intertwined.

Crucially, this framework treats digital participation not as a separate category of participation, but as a transversal infrastructure: a mode of articulation that reshapes every form of participation. This is also echoed my previous work on political participation (Ma and Cao, 2023)

Electoral and Institutional Participation

This dimension draws directly from what Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) define as "conventional participation": activities such as voting, standing for election, joining political parties, or engaging in official policy consultation processes. In typological literature, this category anchors the participatory core—visible, measurable, and can make influence (Dalton, 2008). However, its theoretical significance lies less in its clarity than in its exclusions. It presupposes stable citizenship, procedural literacy, and affective proximity to the host political system—conditions not uniformly distributed. While this form remains central to survey-based political science, it also carries normative significance for democratic legibility.

Contact-Based and System-Referential Participation

Often folded into broader conventional forms, this dimension deserves distinct treatment. Contact-based participation includes writing to political representatives, submitting petitions, or engaging in state feedback mechanisms—actions that directly address the political issues without requiring institutional affiliation. In the Chinese context, establishing personal ties or bribery can also be categorised into this dimension (Ma and Cao, 2023). This thesis also includes these behaviours in political participation as these are essential to Chinese political

Culture. Moreover, digital connection should also be considered as digital space can also create and forge alliances and communities (Ma and Cao, 2023). As Van Deth (2014) suggests, these acts are "vertically oriented": they signal political demand upward. Yet their success depends not only on the action itself, but on whether the actor is heard, positioned, or permitted to matter. For migrant populations, contact-based acts often serve as a means of occupying a subject position within state discourse.

Community Organising and Associational Activities

This dimension captures what Ekman and Amnå (2012) term "latent participation": civic engagement that is not immediately political, but cultivates political orientation and belonging. Organising community associations, both offline and online, leading cultural initiatives, or founding migrant self-help groups, all fall into this category. This dimension is extremely important for Chinese immigrants, as many of them value cultural heritage and symbolic boundaries (Yu *et al.*, 2022). More importantly, boundaries between community events and political gathering are weak theoretically (Ekman and Amnå, 2012). Some scholars consider that these activities may not always have an impact or intent to make an influence which is aligned with the conventional definition. However, as Ekman and Amnå (2012) argued that latent participation is the foundation for concrete political acts. Moreover, in the Chinese political context, public and political are blurred. For accuracy, it is necessary to include this dimension. While often coded as apolitical, these practices constitute long-term participatory infrastructure, especially within transnational contexts. They enable migrants to navigate local power, perform organisational competence, and gradually modulate their position within political society (Putnam, 2000).

Advocacy, Protest, and Mobilisation

Unconventional participation, encompassing protests, demonstrations, and social movement activity, has long been recognised as an essential democratic category (Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Dalton, 2008). Moreover, the digital protest and other forms of digital social movements have become prevalent in recent scholarship (Gerbaudo, 2014). Its legitimacy rises when formal channels are weak, but its perceived legitimacy declines or incriminates when acts fall outside authority's control. Actions in this dimension are often the most visible, but also the riskiest, especially for migrants navigating complex loyalty regimes or transnational surveillance.

Political Consumerism and Symbolic Repositioning

Building on Micheletti et al. (2006) and Theocharis et al. (2019), this dimension includes boycotts, brand choice, clothing, cultural expression, and everyday aesthetic decisions that carry political meanings. Unlike mobilisation, consumer-based participation tries to minimise risks but brings high visibility. Symbolic acts, often dismissed as "soft participation," in fact operate through unified recognisability. As Ma and Cao (2023) argue, for Chinese migrants embedded in constrained expressive regimes, such acts may serve as a way of performing affiliation or refusal. In this way, the symbolic becomes strategic.

Networked Membership and Platform-Mediated Engagement

This dimension reflects the restructuring of organisational affiliation in the digital era. It includes participation in migrant-led digital associations, issue-based Telegram groups, or diasporic collectives whose political function emerges through platform infrastructures, rather than traditional hierarchy. This is different from a physical society or community, because it implies a completely virtual and platform-based or even anonymised affiliation. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) describe this as "connective action": the networked, flexible mobilisation of individualised but politically aligned agents. While these spaces lack institutional solidity, they enable low-barrier political synchronisation, especially under fragmented legal conditions. Importantly, platform design, algorithmic design, and moderation regimes deeply shape this dimension's accessibility and legibility. This is far more complicated when first-generation Mainland Chinese immigrants have to use censored WeChat and encrypted Telegram simultaneously.

Strategic Non-Participation and Regulated Absence

The final dimension challenges the participatory orthodoxy most directly. Following Ekman and Amnå (2012), disengagement is not necessarily apolitical—it can be a political regulation of the self. Scott's (1990) "hidden transcripts" framework reminds us that silence is often chosen under surveillance, not the absence of thought. Ma and Cao (2023) offer a refined concept of strategic silence, in which individuals actively withdraw from participation to avoid misrecognition or sometimes, it is a symbol of refusal of cooperation with the regime. In this dimension, participation becomes negative space, defined by what is resisted rather than

declared. This is not failure to engage. It is a refusal to be consumed by a system, whether in China, the UK or the in-between digital space.

Together, these seven dimensions constitute a reframed architecture of political participation—one that retains the conceptual integrity of classical models while accounting for their structural blind spots. Rather than placing digital participation in its own category, this framework treats the digital as a transversal mechanism: it mediates every participatory act. From e-petitions to encrypted chat, from symbolic likes to algorithmic ghosting, digital platforms reconfigure participation across all dimensions. This section does not propose a new checklist. It constructs a field, a platform for identities to be tested, negotiated and reformed. In the next section, I explore how these dimensions function as mechanisms of identity regulation, not only as expressions of self, but also as strategies of negotiation.

3.4.2 Participation as Regulatory Mechanism of Identity

Based on previous discussion, political participation cannot remain a checklist of actions or a signal of civic involvement, but a negotiation. A way of regulating where, how, and whether one's political presence becomes legible. The framework developed in this section rests on the claim, which has been proposed before, that participation functions not as an expression of identity, but as a mechanism for managing it. For individuals positioned between multiple social systems—between authoritarian pasts and democratic expectations, participation does not simply happen. It is not a binary, but a strategy. And the field within which that strategy operates is structured by two intersecting axes: expression and integration.

The expression axis does not describe whether one speaks. It captures how one carefully evaluates the risks of speaking. At its lower end lies suppression, not as silence alone, but as a form of active opacity, often cultivated over time and across systems. At the upper end indicates assertion. It is a kind of exposure: the moment when a political self is made visible to others. What matters is not how often someone speaks, but under what conditions they decide to or not to. Expression is always conditional and decided by potential cost. And in the case of many migrants, especially those conditioned under authoritarian or transnational authoritarian surveillance regimes, this cost is not hypothetical, but anticipated. The integration axis doesn't just tell us whether someone is included or left out. It points to something deeper: whether inclusion is even available in the first place. Some people aren't just pushed to the edges, they're not even seen. They act, and still, their actions don't register. Or worse, they're

dismissed before they begin. On the other side, there's what we might call symbolic inclusion—the kind that looks like acceptance: being invited, represented, mentioned. With conditions, one has to speak in ways that look safe. One has to know which parts of oneself to show, and which ones to quiet.

So, integration, just like expression, is not only about choice. It is shaped from the outside, but also managed from within. People can be complicated under different conditions. One can be active in institutional settings but refuses to post any words online for safety concerns. Another one may choose to protest to show its visibility, but still, in reality, stand at the periphery. Ignoring contexts and conditions is unfair for scholars from a higher power position to research them. Building on this, we can deepen our understanding by recognising participation itself as an identity-regulatory mechanism, not merely a behaviour or expression. This resonates with identity-based motivation frameworks, which argue that identities cue not just action, but define what kind of action feels meaningful or safe, what Oyserman (2007) calls the sense of what "trying looks like" in a given context. Participation, then, is a negotiation between structure and self, calibrated at the intersection of identity and anticipation.

To bring the expression–integration axes into sharper relational focus, consider how they may interact dynamically. When both axes are high, when migrants feel both able to speak and acknowledged—their actions might resemble strategic assertion: visible yet considered. When both are low, what looks like passivity may instead be a latent form of political existence, as Ekman & Amnå (2012) frame "latent" participation, where engagement exists even if it goes unvoiced. And in mixed cases—say, high expression but low integration—the migrant may loudly articulate but still feel invisible; or low expression but high integration yields discreet but meaningful presence.

Finally, grounding these ideas in everyday experience helps retain the texture of lived strategy. Imagine a migrant opting not to comment on a community board (low expression) precisely because they've attended meetings and have an invitation to speak (moderate integration): their silence isn't absence but a timed modulation, a cautious calibration of presence under evolving risk. This strategic tuning mirrors how identity work unfolds in organisations, where individuals shape actions to align with shifting expectations and to protect coherence—not because identity is fixed, but because it must be managed moment to moment.

This model matters because it makes visible something most participation theories overlook that acts alone do not explain identity strategies. The same behaviour can mean radically different things depending on its position in the expression–integration field. What is often coded as apathy may be a form of protective silence. What is interpreted as radicalism may be the only available voice. Participation, here, is not evidence of who someone is. It is evidence of what they are navigating. For this reason, this framework must not be misunderstood as a typology. It does not group people. It does not seek measurement. It offers a conceptual map of how participation functions as identity modulation. As Ekman and Amnå (2012) suggest, participation is often latent, ambivalent, and withheld. As Ma and Cao (2023) argue, participation for authoritarian-background individuals is never just political—it is tactical. And as Scott (1990) reminds us, much of what is political never appears in transcript at all. It appears only in the careful management of what is made visible, and what must remain offstage.

So, what this chapter contributes is not a definitive model, but a lens. A way to interpret political action through positioning. The following empirical chapters will not test this framework. They will move through it, using it as a way to understand how identity strategies are assembled across complicated political actions.

3.4.3 Platformed Participation: Digital Spaces and Ontological Displacement

Digital platforms have often been described in both academic and public discourse as liberatory spaces—places of connectivity, greater expression, and new forms of mobilisation. However, for first-generation Chinese migrants shaped by different memories and negotiating political life across host and home country logics, such optimism collapses quickly. Digital space is not a neutral field, but a space where participation itself is reconstituted.

This section conceptualises digital participation not only as an extension of offline behaviour, but as a structurally distinct practice governed by what this chapter terms *platformed* sovereignty. The sovereignty of a state extends beyond its border through the flow of data and cable. Migrants are not only choosing whether to participate, but where the servers are located, on which platform, under which logic, and with what anticipated consequences. Their decisions are not only about convenience, but also about survival. This study introduces the concept of platformed participation to describe how migrants' political actions are conditioned by the

specific architectures of the digital systems they use. Participation here is neither autonomous nor symmetrical. Platforms like WeChat, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook are not interchangeable containers. They are structured fields with their own system of risk, visibility, and algorithmic governance (Bucher, 2018; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, 2018). Migrants may engage in "digital self-censorship" and are not withdrawing, but strategically encoding their identity in anticipation of how it will be received—or erased—by both machine and human actors. These will be manifest in empirical chapters.

Migrants do not merely tailor their tone. They compartmentalise entire identities across platforms, with distinct political selves performing in parallel across segmented digital spaces. Subjects use WeChat as a form of subjectivity that appears apolitical or pro-government for safety. WhatsApp offers an ontology that is intimate and critical. Twitter/X is another that offers anonymity, but it is cautious and coded. These digital repertoires are not simply a form of audience adjustment. They reveal a structural modulation—a recalibration of political identity through platform logic.

Platforms do not only moderate what is said, they moderate what it is possible to be. Algorithms filter, rank, delay, and amplify, producing a logic of legibility detached from democratic visibility. As Gillespie (2018) suggests, platforms operate not only through deletion but through *non-appearance*—a quiet invisibility that shapes political subjecthood without needing overt censorship. Migrants' expressions are not always blocked. More often, they are buried. Seen by no one. Interpreted by no one. Computed into irrelevance. It is here that the concept of ontological displacement emerges. This thesis argues that digital space does not merely relocate political engagement; it reconstitutes the very conditions under which political identity exists. In traditional democratic theory, the subject becomes political through speech, visibility, and engagement with institutional structures. But on platforms, the political subject is pre-filtered: interpreted, validated, or silenced by design. One is not political because one speaks. One is political if the platform computes their speech as visible, processable, and amplifiable. In this world, participation is not declared. It is permitted (Chadwick，2017).

What makes this displacement "ontological" is that it alters not what one does, but what one *is*. Migrants are not simply navigating platforms, they are being *remade* by them. Every post, silence, deletion, or delay is a gesture of *self-construction under threat*. As Hall (1996a) noted, identity is never fixed—it is positioned. And in digital space, positioning is computational.

Migrants become what the platform allows them to become. This is most visible in the in-between structure of the digital platform: it is neither wholly private nor entirely public, neither clearly democratic nor fully authoritarian, but something more hybrid and complex. It is a borderless extension of state power, yet not the state; a zone of visibility, but only under unclear conditions. As Glasius (2017) and Tsourapas (2018) show, such digital infrastructures increasingly act as tools of transnational authoritarianism—silently extending surveillance, controlling affect, and pre-shaping response across time zones without physical feelings(Glasius, 2017; Tsourapas, 2018; Pearce and Kendzior, 2012).

Yet the digital is not only the extension of state control. It also *displaces the space of politics itself*. The platform becomes the arena. Politics is enacted in private groups, anonymous handles, and liked-but-unshared content. Not only are these forms hard to see from outside—they are hard to verify from within. Migrants themselves live with uncertainty about how visible they are, who sees what, and how that visibility may later be used against them. Participation becomes not performance but calculation. To participate, then, is not merely to express or take actions. It is to decide whether the platform one chooses will recognise one's speech as meaningful, safe, or even real. On WeChat, a post may trigger repression. On Twitter/X, it may disappear into a void or been attacked by radicals. On WhatsApp or Telegram, it may circulate among trusted friends but go no further—or it may go further if that trust proves unfounded. None of these acts is inherently more political. But each is shaped by the specific risks and epistemological assumptions of the platform that hosts it and the state or legal system behind these. Individual, platform, social norms, visibility and state present in this scenario simultaneously and none of them can be ignored or treated arbitrarily.

Digital participation thus cannot be subsumed under classical typologies of voting, protesting, or civic membership. It operates across all dimensions and cannot be defined a separated dimension. Migrants not only manage what they say. They manage how their existence appears. (Hall, 1996b; Boyd, 2014). This chapter does not suggest that platforms wholly suppress or fully liberate. Instead, they function as governance machines, subtly guiding what is sayable, survivable, or even thinkable. Politics no longer happens in fixed and clear shared space. It happens in segmented streams, unseen timelines, or in a post that might be quietly deleted hours after its publication, sometimes by the user, sometimes by the platform, sometimes by no one at all. Many of these are semi-public spaces or trusted environments, but have a high risk of being espoused and analysed. That is also why this study embeds digital participation across

seven dimensions rather than positioning it in a separate, independent typology. By reframing political participation as regulation rather than merely expression, this framework addresses the blind spots in typology-driven approaches that misrecognise silence as apathy and visibility as success.

3.5 Conclusion: Identity Work as Situated and Regulated Political Practice

This chapter neither attempts to define what identity is nor tries to catalogue political participation. Instead, it has built a lens or a way of looking at how individuals navigate their identity and political actions.

At the heart of this lens are four interlocking constructs. First, identity is not a static asset or essence, but a situated, dynamic and constantly shifting composition, performing under pressures, and moderated across structural barriers. Section 3.2 details these through four dimensions: the complexity and multi-layered nature of identity, the performativity of identity in front of different audiences, the relational position and the strategically constructed nature with agency of identity. These dimensions deny the internal coherence and emphasis that individuals must make to occupy positions in front of uncertain contexts. Second, political participation is reframed not as a democratic output or a behavioural indicator of integration, but as a regulatory mechanism. Section 3.4 proposed that individuals do not participate in order to express identity. They participate in regulating how that identity becomes readable. Political participation helps manage risk and facilitates the chance to be heard without misrecognition.

Third, this logic was mapped across a two-axis structure: expression and integration. Expression ranges from suppression to assertion. Integration, likewise, is not a binary of in or out, but a structure of conditional inclusion or acceptance, where belonging is partial, performative, or contingent. The mapping further developed in Section 3.4.2 does not divide subjects. It constructs a field in which political acts become positioning strategies. This model does not predict what people will do. It explains the structural field within which decisions are made, avoided, reversed, or formed. This is an arena for identity and political participation to interact and co-construct. Chapter 6 will elaborate on these in detail.

The fourth emphasis came through the recognition of digital space as not just a medium, but a condition or moderator. Platforms do not simply host participation. They reformat it. The

platform becomes a structure of algorithmic governance, computational visibility, and ontological displacement. What is said may not appear. What appears may not survive. What survives may not be interpreted, and what is interpreted may not be remembered. Political participation, in this space, becomes platformed participation—governed by infrastructures that are not neutral, and which displace not only what is done, but who the actor is allowed to become.

The chapter outlined seven participation dimensions as strategic positions within the broader field, not as a distinct typology. These include electoral and institutional participation, where civic acts are recognised legally; contact-based acts like petitioning or emailing MPs, which connect directly to state structures but are often selective and distant; community-based engagement, which fosters trust at the fringes and facilitate further formal political participation; advocacy and mobilisation, representing high-risk but direct activities; symbolic and consumerist actions, shifting politics into daily gestures; networked affiliations via digital or informal ties; and strategic non-participation—silence, absence, and retreat—as deliberate rather than failure.

Each of these dimensions is neither a standalone category nor a predictive mode of conduct. They are points of entry into a regulatory structure. They are the forms through which subjects hold themselves in place, even when that place is fragile or contested. These dimensions will not be measured but rather interpreted. Chapter 6 will return to them, not to verify, but to trace how real individuals move through them—sometimes simultaneously, sometimes with contradiction, sometimes with deep internal cost. Based on the philological stands of this thesis, this chapter isn't a theory of the self or a closed political behaviour model. It's a way or toolbox to understand political participation and identity from the edge, not the centre of democracy, but from the periphery of conditional inclusion.

In Chapter 5, these tools will be used to map strategic identity configurations. In Chapter 6, the focus will shift to participation. The interpretive lens built before makes this chapter not definitive, but a necessary part of the procedure. Before we can talk about who speaks, we must first understand who is allowed to appear—and under what circumstances.

CHAPTER 4 Methodology and Research Methods

4.1 Introduction

Based on the discussion in Chapter 2 and 3, this research is neither interested in defining and investigating identity as a label, nor in participation as a checklist. It is interesting in the places or spaces where the two meet, and how they co-construct one another. For first-generation Chinese migrants from Mainland China living in the UK, political participation is rarely just about politics. And identity does so in fragments: layered, diversified, hidden, hesitant, strategic and sometimes hypocritical. Thus, this chapter is about how one looks for those fragments—not to capture them in categories, but to make space for them to speak, however indirectly. The methodological path here is qualitative, interpretive, and, necessarily, cautious. Not cautious in its ambition, but in its attention to context.

As argued in earlier chapters, this study takes a constructivist view of identity, one grounded in the idea that who we are is not something we always carry with us fully formed, but something that is shaped in the interaction itself (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Hall, 1996a). And if identity is shaped that way. The connotations of identity do not sit waiting to be discovered. It is made, often unevenly, between people, moments, silences, and expression (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).

Methodologically, this study borrows a structure from Grix's approach (2010), namely ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods (and sources), but does so loosely. It is not a formula, but a rhythm. The ontology, as noted, is relational and non-essentialist: identity is treated as contingent and socially embedded and constructed (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). The epistemology follows from that—it assumes that knowledge, particularly in matters of identity and participation, is co-produced, unstable, and sometimes incomplete. So, it is necessary for the researcher to always interpret in context. (Geertz, 1973; Fairclough, 1992).

The real work of this chapter, though, is in explaining how that orientation shaped the tools used for the purpose of this research. Rather than building from a fixed set of theoretical categories, the analysis was shaped by the conceptual architecture developed in Chapter 3—where identity is treated as strategically performed, situationally adjusted, and continuously regulated through the tensions between expression and They are more like lenses—ways of

noticing how participants frame themselves or avoid framing at all. To explore those dynamics, I used a combination of semi-structured interviews, auto-photography, and photo elicitation. The choices here were not only methodological—they were also ethical and emotional. For many participants, politics is not something they talk about lightly or freely. Sometimes it is something they prefer not to talk about at all.

Moreover, Politics can be embedded in education, family relations and everywhere. Too structured approach may ignore or intentionally avoid useful information. That's why the methods needed to be flexible, slow, and in some ways open-ended. As Pink (2007) and King and Horrocks (2010) have both suggested, certain methods allow participants to set the tone, or shift the terms of engagement. The analysis was conducted through a process of Reflexive thematic Analysis, following the work of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), but again, with some adjustments. The idea was not to flatten what participants said into categories too quickly, but to move through the material iteratively, reading for tension, repetition, silence, and constantly positioning myself. I came back to transcripts and memo again and again, trying to hear what was just beneath the surface and my subjective understanding of these words.

Ethical considerations ran through all of this. Informed consent and anonymity were carefully maintained (Silverman, 2013), but in a deeper sense of what it means to ask someone to speak about things they've learned not to say. Some participants made this easier. Others did not. But in both cases, the responsibility was mine: to listen carefully, to ask gently, and above all, to never treat what was withheld as empty.

This chapter, then, is not just a technical account of methods. It is an attempt to be transparent about how the work of interpretation was done. Because when identity and participation are approached not as objects to be measured but as ongoing, situated practices, then the research itself must become part of that situatedness. It listens, it waits, and it tries—imperfectly—to hold what is shared and can be shared with care and respect.

4.2 Method and Philosophical Fit

The methodological framework adopted here grew out of the philosophical commitments established earlier. It was not applied linearly but developed through negotiation. Grounded in a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, the design had to respond to

complexity, fragmentation, and the unpredictability of meaning as it emerged in context. It had to do more than collect data; it had to follow it.

Constructivist perspectives view identity as not fixed but always in formation—produced in interaction, shaped by environment, made visible or hidden depending on risk and recognition (Hall, 1996a; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Participation, under this view, is not merely a matter of civic engagement, but something that might surface as hesitation, strategic silence, or symbolic gestures that do not easily fall into standard categories. And as discussed in Chapter 3, political participation is a regulatory mechanism of identity.

These assumptions call for an epistemology that sees knowledge as something built between people, rather than something the researcher finds and extracts (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). As a result, the research could not rely on clarity or consistency. It had to remain attentive to what was partial, affective. Or in other words, this research tries to know how people interpret politics and how politics influence their daily lives. This is an interactive construction instead of simply classifying. To stay open to this, the design combined several methods. Participant-generated photography or auto-photography was used at first (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006). The decision came slowly, after noticing that several participants spoke more easily when referring to a personal object or image. Participants were invited to submit a small number of images reflecting any aspects of their life in the UK. Some submitted literal snapshots—a front door, a kitchen table or a dish. Others sent images that are quite abstract, something they draw or create. The value of these images lies less in what they show than in how they are introduced—what was explained, and what was not. Their ambiguity made room for interpretation. This method is designed for understanding identity formation and manifestation.

Photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) was introduced alongside this for understanding their political stands. A set of images of political participation, generated by AI, which were carefully generated under the prompts (See Appendix A) describing political actions drawn from seven dimensions of political participation listed in Chapter 3, was shown during interviews.

The responses varied. A few participants dismissed them outright. Others used them to talk around sensitive topics. Without the researcher's restrictions, they can offer any angle for interpreting their idea of politics. Participants can give a completely different understanding of the same image, which leaves an impressive room for interpretation, though the participants

struggled to say exactly why. In these moments, the method was less a way to produce a particular meaning than to allow meanings to emerge.

Conventional semi-structured interviews were used as only a supplementary method (King and Horrocks, 2010). They offered enough structure to explore themes. Participants seemed to shift position depending on the phrasing, or perhaps the room itself. This is a perfect verification of their free narratives before.

For analysis, the study used the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). It was not selected for efficiency, but because it allowed the researcher to read slowly, to return, to change direction when necessary. Coding was iterative, with handwritten memos used to track emerging tensions. My feelings and subjective reactions are carefully revisited. Thematic codes were shaped through this process. They marked spaces where participants negotiated what could be said, and what had to remain unspoken.

Other approaches were considered. Grounded theory seemed difficult to reconcile with this thesis that had already made theoretical commitments from the outset. Content analysis is too focused on classification and can be ill-equipped to handle the ambiguity that marked much of the material. Framework analysis, while structured and clear, usually puts themes into pre-set boxes, which is strictly denied by this research. For another two types of thematic analysis, the codebook thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), with its emphasis on predefined categories and coding consensus, was also set aside. Its underlying assumption, that agreement between coders enhances analytic validity, was not aligned with the epistemological stance taken here, which treats interpretation as context-dependent and shaped by researcher positionality and understandings.

Code reliability thematic analysis, emphasising the cross-coding and reliability, is considered valuable in coding consistency or generalisability, but is unsuitable for this project's interpretive stand. The kinds of meanings encountered here often emerged through hesitation, contradiction, or disrupted narrative flow—features that resist reduction to cross-coding agreement (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2022). The objective was not to produce uniform interpretations, but to remain attentive to the relational, emotional, and context-sensitive nature of how meaning was co-constructed. For reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher is also the research tool (Braun and Clarke, 2021). As interpretive research, admitting the constraints of the researcher's own positionality and limitations is not a drawback,

but an advantage to respect the reality that this is an exploratory attempt. The resulting approach, then, was not driven by method alone, but by a need to stay close to how people spoke—when they spoke, and when they didn't. In a field shaped by constraint, misrecognition, and careful self-presentation, the methods had to absorb tension, not resolve it. Meaning was not always there to be found, but it could be followed and interpreted.

4.3 Data and Fieldwork: Sampling, Participants, and Procedure

4.3.1 Sampling Strategy and Participant Composition

The sampling strategy for this study was designed with two objectives in mind: to ensure internal variation within the first-generation Mainland Chinese migrant population in the UK, and to produce a pool that could support conceptual saturation across identity positions. However, this design, as emphasised several times, is not pursuing statistical representativeness. The logic of selection was therefore purposive and strategic. Purposive features are embedded in variation such as migration status, gender, religious affiliation, ethnic subgroup, and time of residence.

Participants were recruited through a mixed approach that combined snowball sampling with community-based outreach. I contacted over 200 individuals through emails or messages from LinkedIn, Red Note, Facebook, Twitter (currently X) and WeChat groups across several UK cities. Through this method, I received about 15 replies, and I tried to use them as gatekeepers to help me find more participants. The whole recruiting period lasts for over 5 months. This process was extremely hard as most people refused to participate due to safety or time factors. Even though I tried my best to explain my positionality and similar safety considerations, mutual trust was also hard to establish.

In total, forty participants were interviewed, all meeting the definition of long-term migrant established by the UN(UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1998) and my own standard explained in Chapter 1, having resided in the UK for over 183 days as a legal taxable resident. In practice, years of residence ranged from just over 1 year to more than 30. The sample reflected significant variation across economic positioning and sociocultural backgrounds. I do not treat legal status as a threshold for this research, as legal status can be pretty misleading for participants to set boundaries, distinguishing themselves from others.

The final sample includes university students, postdoctoral researchers, lecturers in universities, self-employed business owners, full-time homemakers, workers, takeaway and restaurant employees, religious converts and more. Among the forty, 23 were identified as female and 17 as male. While most participants were of Han ethnicity, the sample also included Hui, Manchu minorities. Religious affiliation was similarly diverse: 2 participants identified as evangelical or Anglican Christian, and the rest as atheist or unaffiliated. Political experience also varied: some had voted in local UK elections or held clear opinions about Chinese domestic politics; others expressed discomfort, fatigue, or total avoidance.

No.	Age Group	Category	Gender	Years in the UK/Legal status	Ethnicity/Religion
P1	18-29	High Skilled Worker (Administrative Staff)	Female	2 years/ PSW visa	Han
P2	18-29	International Student (Master)	Male	1 year/ Student Visa	Han
P3	18-29	International Student (Master)	Male	1 year/ Student Visa	Han
P4	20-29	High Skilled Worker (Engineer)	Male	6 years/Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P5	20-29	High Skilled Worker (Administrative Staff)	Female	4 years/Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P6	20-29	International Student (PhD)	Male	6 years/Student Visa	Han
P7	20-29	High Skilled Worker (Lecturer)	Female	6 years/Global Talent Visa	Han
P8	20-29	High Skilled Worker (Lecturer)	Male	10 years/Permanent Residency	Han
P9	18-29	International Student (Undergraduate)	Male	3 years/Student Visa	Han
P10	30-39	Labour Worker (Waiter)	Female	3 years/PSW Visa	Han
P11	18-29	High Skilled Worker (Sales)	Male	3 years/Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P12	30-39	High Skilled Worker (HR)	Female	3 years/ Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P13	40-50	High Skilled Worker (Journalist/Councillor Candidate)	Female	15 years/British Citizen	Han

P14	30-39	Labour Worker (Barista)	Female	4 years/Dependent Visa	Han
P15	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Data Analyst)	Male	4 years/Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P16	40-49	High Skilled Worker (Restaurant Manager)	Female	25 years/ Permanent Residency	Manchu
P17	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Behavioural Scientist)	Female	8 years/PSW Visa	Han
P18	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Researcher)	Female	4 years/Dependent Visa	Han
P19	20-29	High Skilled Worker (Administrative Staff)	Female	3 years/Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P20	20-29	High Skilled Worker (Marketing Professional)	Female	4 years/Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P21	20-29	High Skilled Worker (Administrative Staff)	Female	8 years/PSW Visa	Han
P22	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Administrative Staff)	Male	12 years/British Citizen	Han
P23	60+	Labour Worker (Farmer)	Female	5 years/Permanent Residency	Han
P24	20-29	International Student (PhD)	Male	8 years/Student Visa	Han, Christian
P25	30-39	Labour Worker (Waiter)	Female	10 years/ Permanent Residency	Han
P26	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Manager/Councillor)	Male	16 years/British Citizen	Han
P27	20-30	High Skilled Worker (Lecturer)	Female	10 years/ Permanent Residency	Hui
P28	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Chinese Teacher)	Female	12 years/British Citizen	Han
P29	40-50	Dependent	Female	25 years/British Citizen	Han
P30	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Artist)	Female	4 years/Skilled Worker Visa	Han
P31	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Business Owner)	Female	12 years/ Permanent Residency	Manchu

P32	30-39	High Skilled Worker (Charity)	Female	15 years/ Permanent Residency	Han
P33	40-50	Dependent (Casual Worker)	Female	24 years/ Permanent Residency	Han, Christian
P34	30-39	Dependent (Podcaster)	Male	2 years/Dependent Visa	Han
P35	60+	Labour Worker (Grocery store)	Female	30 years/British Citizen	Han
P36	60+	Labour Worker (Grocery store)	Male	30 years/British Citizen	Han
P37	30-39	Dependent (Start-up)	Female	4 years/Dependent Visa	Hui
P38	30-39	High Skilled Worker （Researcher）	Male	6 years/Dependent Visa	Mongolian
P39	40-50	Labour Worker (Chef)	Male	13 years/British Citizen	Han
P40	30-39	Labour Worker (Chef)	Male	15 years/British Citizen	Han

Table 2 Demographic Information of Participants

These categories, however, were not treated as explanatory variables. Participants were not representative of "types," but positioned in the study for how their narratives engaged or complicated theoretical concerns. Several participants were included as what might be called boundary cases. For example, P33, a long-settled evangelical Christian woman, articulated identity primarily through faith, substituting religious community for political belonging. P6, a PhD student, spoke with striking precision about how not speaking was itself a political act, revealing how silence operated as both protection and position.

These roles were not preassigned but became visible through their relational function in the data. Some participants, particularly recent students (e.g., P3, P4), articulated their identity in relation to both host society and home-state imaginaries. Others, such as Christian converts (e.g., P24), presented faith as an alternative structure of meaning and moral allegiance, due to some incidents. Several participants (e.g., P1,P37) navigated overlapping tensions between activism, self-censorship, and self-expression, offering key insights into the layered calculation of risk in transnational contexts.

By drawing in these cases, the study did not aim for balance, but for interpretive pressure. I try to test how identity is narrated, translated, and reshaped under shifting regimes of recognition. Sampling, in this sense, was not only about who was included, but about what kinds of stories became thinkable when these voices were placed alongside one another. Talking politics with people from mainland China is always not an easy task and even very tough.

4.3.2 Access to organisations and recruitment challenges

This study is deliberately designed around individual trajectories and lived experiences rather than organisational case studies. As outlined above, the analytical focus is on how first-generation migrants from Mainland China in the UK construct identities and navigate participation across different sites of everyday life, rather than on the formal structures or public narratives of particular civic, cultural, or community organisations. Nevertheless, Chinese community organisations, student and scholar associations, churches, media platforms, and pan-ESEA networks constitute important institutional sites where political meanings are produced, negotiated, and constrained. For that reason, these entities were initially envisaged as potential field entry points and possible interlocutors for accessing participants and understanding the institutional dimensions of participation.

In practice, however, recruitment via organisations proved extremely limited and fraught. I contacted a wide range of groups, including Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) at several universities, Chinese churches and regional associations in English cities, Chinese-language radio stations and media platforms catering to first-generation Mandarin-speaking audiences, and several informal Mainland Chinese networks that organise social or cultural activities. Initial contact was made through publicly available emails, online forms, and direct messaging on platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Instagram, and Facebook. Each outreach included a brief project description, ethics approval information from the University, details about anonymity and data protection, and an invitation either to circulate a recruitment poster or to participate in an interview about the organisation's engagement with Mainland Chinese migrants.

The responses revealed a pattern of silence, hesitation, and in some cases, explicit mistrust. Most organisations did not respond, despite follow-ups. Some that did reply requested clarification about the purpose of the research, potential political sensitivity, and whether it was in any way linked to the Chinese government or its overseas representatives. In a few instances, initial interest from individuals dissipated following internal discussion, with comments—often off the record—highlighting discomfort around engaging with research explicitly addressing "political participation." Concerns included fears about digital traceability, possible misinterpretation by UK authorities or Chinese state actors, and questions about whether the research might "cause trouble" for the community or portray it as "unpatriotic."

These access difficulties are not merely logistical challenges; they are analytically significant. The reluctance or refusal of organisations to act as formal gatekeepers, their sensitivity to funding sources, and their concern over public portrayal all echo the dynamics of fear, caution, and reputational risk examined in participants' individual narratives. Moreover, relying on organisational recruitment alone would likely have excluded individuals who are marginal to, or intentionally distanced from, formal associations. As a result, the study prioritised recruitment through interpersonal networks, individually negotiated trust, and limited engagement with informal online spaces over institutional partnerships. This approach does not diminish the relevance of organisations, but instead acknowledges both the ethical and political sensitivities of involving them directly.

4.3.3 Research Design and Procedural Steps

While the project remained anchored in a constructivist ontology and interpretive epistemology (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012), its methods had to be continually adapted—not because of design failure, but because identity and political positioning did not always present themselves when asked. They surfaced, sometimes indirectly, in what was said casually, what was returned to, or what was carefully avoided. Three data collection methods were used for this research.

Auto-photography(Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006) was employed as a generative and participant-led entry point into identity research. Rather than treating photographs as standalone data, the method encouraged participants to select or create images that represented aspects of their everyday life and their understandings of themselves. These images—ranging from family rituals to public signage—were not analysed for visual content alone but interpreted through participants' own narratives. Often, what participants chose not to show, or the discomfort they expressed in selecting images, became as analytically relevant or significant as the photographs themselves. This method followed the logic proposed by Pink (2007), whereby the image serves less as object than as relational prompt—opening a space for affective and situated reflection that may not emerge through verbal narrative alone.

Photo elicitation was introduced following the participants-led phase. Participants were presented with a curated set of AI-generated （Chat-GPT 3.5） images based on the seven dimensions of political participation outlined in Chapter 3. These visuals functioned to provoke

responses through a tangible behaviour which can facilitate the discussion of a quite abstract concept without explaining what is political. Harper (2002) notes that photo elicitation can disrupt scripted responses and bring forward alternative registers of meaning. In this study, the method allowed participants to engage with politics through symbolic interpretation. To avoid over-categorisation of political participation and misleading participants, I asked them to provide all political behaviours they had previously engaged in before seeing photos. In reality, no political actions they mentioned fall outside my dimensions, and these photos did help them identify more political actions that they participated in unintentionally.

Semi-structured interviews functioned as the third interpretive strand in a methodological design informed by the logic—though not the formal procedure—of triangulation. Auto-photography (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006) and photo elicitation were intentionally flexible: interviews began with live experience or life history and gradually opened into themes of belonging, negotiation, and selective participation (King and Horrocks, 2010). Rather than serve as a confirmatory check, the interviews provided a complementary perspective. The interviews played a crucial role in holding those tensions in place, allowing for complexity across and within cases and verifying some information.

The fieldwork began with sending messages and emails, as noted in the previous section. After recruiting the first round of participants, I used them as gatekeepers to contact more. Potential participants were invited to join a study with a detailed explanation of the project and research design. They have the freedom to choose to participate online or in person. The invitation made no reference to politics or participation in reality, in part to minimise self-selection bias. More importantly, I avoided inviting people during the period of the general election of 2024, minimising the risk of implying political positions. In-person interviews took place mostly in cafes or public areas. Except for one participant, this participant insisted on inviting me to his/her home and believed that this would be more comfortable for our conversation.

Once a participant agreed, a pre-interview message was sent, which included a request to bring, or think about bringing, photographs that represented something about their life or self in the UK. Each session lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in person or via Zoom, depending on participant availability and geographical constraints. All interviews were audio or hand recorded (many participants refused to audio-record due to the sensitivity of the research topic), transcribed, and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), ensuring that verbal narratives were critically examined in conjunction with visual data. These will be explained in

detail later. At this point, the method began to shift. While some participants responded enthusiastically, many declined to share photographs in advance, citing privacy concerns or simply uncertainty about what kind of image would be "appropriate" or because someone was afraid of the potential leaking of the photos. In response, the protocol was revised. Participants were no longer required to bring images if they did not want to, but were given the option to choose these photos during the interview and to withdraw them after I took notes or show them in person during the conversation. This flexibility aligned with existing research on visual methods, which suggests that participant-led image production often carries more meaning through its absence, substitution, or reluctance than through the image itself (Pink, 2007; Clough, P. T. ,2000). I asked participants to offer at least 6 photos; however, many of them only provided me with one or two. During the photo interview, I did not ask any questions during the description of photos, but I might ask about some details I observed in the photos in order to dig deeper into the informant's viewpoints.

After the auto-photography phase, a further layer was introduced: photo elicitation using AI-generated images. The images were produced using ChatGPT-3.5, prompted by descriptions derived from the seven dimensions of political participation discussed in Chapter 3. Detailed photos are attached to this thesis as Appendix A. Each participant was shown a subset of 11 images one by one during the interview, without any timing restrictions. By this point, participants had usually spoken in detail about their engagement with these political behaviours or their attitudes toward them. This technique draws on Harper's (2002) account of photo elicitation as a method that displaces direct questioning and opens up emotional and cognitive approaches that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

Each interview was ended by a semi-structured interview (King and Horrocks, 2010), but varied in rhythm depending on the participant. This method is not a strict triangulation, but still serves as a way of verification. I did find some contradictions within some participants' descriptions of photos and answers to the semi-structured interview. Throughout the interviews, handwritten memos were taken when I felt it was necessary to record tone, hesitation, physical gestures, and my own feelings where the participant seemed to modulate their speech, for example, by changing words, avoiding a pronoun, or rephrasing a sentence.

These moments became crucial during analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), coding was not applied uniformly but developed iteratively. The researcher returned to transcripts alongside notes, often re-reading

passages that at first seemed straightforward. What looked like a factual response on first read, began to carry more interpretive weight when recalled with them. In several interviews, the structure itself had to be modified mid-way. For example, some participants felt the interview was too long to endure, or someone continued to ask me about whether I have a Chinese government background or whether I received funding from the UK government. Sadly, neither was true as I received no government funding for this research. Consequently, I had to adjust the rhythm of the interview and maintain a comfortable environment for them. These were not treated as deviations, but as part of the method—a method that required responsiveness. This aligns with what Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) described as a research ethic that is processual in interpretive work: not just adjusting the tools but recognising that inquiry itself is situated with moral and emotional aspects.The data collection phase yielded a highly detailed dataset, comprising 210 participant-submitted images (documented as textual records, not stored). AI-generated images for structured political engagement discussions. 40 interviews (including auto-photography, photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews), totalling approximately 600000 characters in Chinese. Handwritten field memos capturing non-verbal cues, emotional responses, and my own reflections or feelings. These diverse data sources provide a methodologically rigorous foundation for the upcoming analysis.

Regarding other ethical considerations and my own positionality, those will be addressed in detail in section 4.5.

4.4 Analytical Framework: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

4.4.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis in Practice

The analytic approach taken in this study followed the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) （Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019). RTA was chosen not for its procedural simplicity, but because of its philosophical compatibility with a study grounded in constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. This research does not assume that identity exists as pre-formed entities to be discovered or that the interactions between identity and political participation are a defined pattern in the data. Instead, they are understood as something constructed relationally. RTA provides a flexible and theoretically sensitive framework for engaging with this kind of material, allowing patterns to be interpreted as meaningful within context, rather than isolated for measurement.

One key distinction between RTA and other thematic approaches lies in its stance on quantification. In contrast to content analysis or codebook-based TA, RTA does not evaluate analytic significance by frequency. A theme does not matter because it appears in ten interviews, but because of what it does in the dataset. This was especially relevant in a context where participants often have connotations and hidden meanings. Reducing these moments to mere counts would oversimplify the complexity the study aims to explore (Braun and Clarke, 2021). More importantly, as this is the first research in this field, 40 samples cannot encompass all variations. Therefore, no potential clue for analysis should be overlooked. RTA also differs meaningfully from Grounded Theory. While both are inductive principally, Grounded Theory assumes a goal of theory generation, often through rigid procedural coding, constant comparison, and saturation (Charmaz, 2006). This project, however, was not aiming to produce a generalisable theory of identity or participation. Instead, it treated theoretical models developed in Chapter 3 as a sensitising lens (Blumer, 1954), which helps the researcher notice patterns or tensions, without predetermining what those patterns will mean.

While RTA does not require a formal theory to be in place prior to analysis, it does not exclude theory either. On the contrary, theoretical frameworks, when used as sensitising tools rather than testable hypotheses, can play a powerful role in shaping how the researcher reads, interprets, and organises the data (Blumer, 1954; Braun and Clarke, 2021). In this study, the framework outlined in Chapter 3 served precisely in that way: not as a checklist to be verified, but as interpretive lenses that allowed the researcher to notice the clues of interpretation. These models shaped the kinds of questions asked of the data, but they remained open to revision. In this sense, theory did not only direct the analysis, but also entered into dialogue with it.

The analysis unfolded in a recursive, rather than linear, structure. It began with repeated readings of each transcript, attended not just to content but to narrative structure. Reflexive memos written during or immediately after interviews helped recall non-verbal cues. Open coding followed, using short, descriptive or affective labels that captured emerging tensions or patterns. These included not only what participants said but how they said it—how tone, phrasing, or metaphor signalled discomfort or strategic ambiguity. Codes were revised over time, with earlier transcripts revisited in light of new insights. After open coding, codes were grouped into provisional themes. This phase required regular revisit and negotiation between the codes, the fieldnotes, and the theoretical lens. Themes were not declared finished when they "fit," but when they held analytic meanings. Naming themes was the final part of this process.

Each was labelled in a way that kept it close to participant language, but also analytically meaningful. Although the analytic process in this study followed a recursive and interpretive style, it remained broadly aligned with the six-phase structure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These phases include: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

In practice, they were not treated as fixed stages but as overlapping zones of analysis. For example, theme naming and coding refinement frequently occurred at the same time. This flexible engagement with the six-step process allowed the study to retain both methodological rigour and analytical flexibility, in line with RTA's interpretive ground (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

4.4.2 Coding and Theme Development

Following the above-mentioned process, I began the thematic analysis of the dataset, which included semi-structured interviews, participant-generated photographs, descriptions, and photo elicitation materials. This multi-modal structure required an approach to coding that stayed sensitive to connotations. Although NVivo 14 was used at the beginning, it proved counterproductive. The software encouraged path dependency. I felt the previously named nodes could mislead me to add new materials into old categories, preventing me from truly reflecting the real meanings of new materials. This is obviously the technique of codebook thematic analysis, which I have to get rid of.

More significantly, nearly half of the interviews were not recorded following the requirements of the participants. For these, notes were taken by hand. Some parts of these notes were written in abbreviated or impressionistic forms that could not be easily transferred into software. These constraints made me decide to code manually. Most of the coding was done directly on transcripts or fieldnotes, using annotations or colour markers for tracing patterns. The coding process was experienced over three rounds to ensure sufficient and satisfactory reflection. The first cycle took place in November 2024, shortly after the initial wave of interviews. A second round was conducted in February 2025. The final round finished in early May 2025. Each cycle involved a full rereading of all transcripts and fieldnotes, followed by comparison memos and thematic reconsideration.

In each round, new codes were added, some collapsed, and some codes were retained for conceptual tension, instead of frequency. Because much of the material, particularly in non-recorded interviews, relied on pacing, gesture, and contextual cues, working manually allowed for more reflexive and flexible attention to how meaning emerge. The initial round of open coding, conducted in November 2024 using both NVivo-assisted and manual annotation, generated over 120 discrete first-level codes. This coding phase was quite free and expansive. At this stage, I allowed the early codes to follow both the participants' semantic cues and my own affective impressions. The purpose was not immediate interpretive clarity, but maximum understanding of the discursive texture of the material. However, as the second and third rounds of analysis unfolded, I began to compare these codes, merged some due to overlapping functions, and removed isolated expressions lacking broader theoretical or interpretive values. For example, one early code—"food alternative"—was derived from a participant's comment about choosing pasta over noodles in the UK as an alternative. This behaviour neither strengthens the identity as Chinese nor compels the participant to embrace Western culture. While this seemed potentially meaningful at first, it lacked interpretive depth across cases and was ultimately excluded to preserve thematic coherence. During the second and third rounds of coding, particular care was taken to avoid conceptual inflation: a high number of codes was not treated as a sign of rigour, but as a starting point for sifting conceptual resonance from descriptive fragmentation.

Through repeated cross-comparisons, memo re-visiting, and model refinement, the coding structure stabilised at 51 core units: 34 related to identity and 17 to political participation. This number reflects not a limitation of data, but a consolidation of conceptual architecture. It marked the point where additional codes no longer expanded the explanatory range of the framework. Unlike grounded theory, which encourages exhaustive coding until saturation emerges through category accumulation, Reflexive Thematic Analysis permits interpretive sufficiency once the model begins to hold conceptually (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

A total of 51 first-level codes were developed through this process. Some codes were more descriptive, such as references to cultural practices, professional identity, or media use. Others were more interpretive, capturing patterns of guarded speech, such as symbolic substitution or strategic silence. A complete list of codes, definitions, and data examples is presented in Appendix B1.

The identity-related codes covered several thematic areas. Some participants spoke about maintaining Chinese traditions abroad—celebrating Lunar New Year, cooking traditional dishes, or decorating private spaces with familiar artefacts. These were grouped as "Cultural Retention." Others discussed feeling out of place—excluded in professional settings, hesitant in public spaces, or unable to connect with British social norms. These were coded as "Social Exclusion." A number of participants described their work identity as central to how they positioned themselves—particularly in teaching, healthcare, or technical professions. These were coded as "Occupational Identity." Additional codes included "Media Preference," referring to those who primarily consumed Chinese news or entertainment; "Family Obligation," describing economic or moral duties toward family members in China; and "Resistance to Assimilation," which captured explicit refusals to adapt to British lifestyle expectations. These identity codes reflect the ways participants negotiated visibility, belonging, and cultural continuity.

Political participation codes were less directly stated and required more interpretive reading. Many participants framed political engagement carefully, speaking through digital spaces, selective activism, or deliberate avoidance. Codes such as "Digital Political Engagement," "WeChat Discourse," and "Digital Liminality" captured how participants used online platforms to follow or discuss politics within private or controlled networks. Other codes, like "Strategic Withdrawal" and "Transnational Political Fear," emerged from participants who avoided political speech altogether, often mentioning surveillance concerns or professional risk. A smaller number described specific actions—signing petitions, attending single-issue protests, or boycotting brands—that were coded under "Selective Activism," "Issue-Based Participation," or "Economic Political Expression." There were also cases where participants chose faith as a reason for political abstention—these were coded as "Religious-Driven Political Abstention." All political engagement codes, including definitions and quotes, are detailed in Appendix B1.

At this stage, the aim was not to build theory or test categories, but to remain close to the meanings of what participants offered. Coding did not follow a checklist. It followed the narrative. Some codes appeared only once or twice, but remained because of how they pointed sideways, toward something that really exists in the world. Others occur across many interviews but were retained not only for their frequency, but for the different ways to interpret. Together, these 51 codes formed the interpretive foundation for the next phase of the analysis.

Following the three rounds of initial coding and memo development, the analysis progressed toward a more structured thematic organisation. This did not involve a mechanical grouping of codes by keyword or similarity, but rather a slow, interpretive process aimed at understanding what particular codes were doing in context. The process began with repeated memo cycles. After each interview was coded, a short analytic memo was written, not just listing the codes found, but reflecting on how they interacted, conflicted, or sat uneasily alongside each other. These memos were then compared across participants. For example, the code "Cultural Retention" appeared frequently in narratives involving food, language, and family rituals.

But its tone varied: in some interviews, it conveyed pride and stability; in others, it was linked to nostalgia or even loss. These tonal shifts raised the question: could this be treated as one theme? Or did it fracture under scrutiny? Rather than separating the code into emotional subcodes, it was retained as part of a broader theme, Cultural Identities, but its internal diversity was documented. This approach was repeated across the entire process. Codes were not forced into clean boxes, but examined for whether they could live together inside a thematic frame or without other codes, and whether a code could be interpreted further within the theoretical framework. Where tensions remained unresolved, they were written into the theme's definition. The goal was not to simplify the data, but to hold its texture or value.

Before the full development of themes, I introduced an intermediate step—not formalised in RTA, but useful as a practical aid. Certain codes that appeared to share similar narrative positioning or function were tentatively grouped into categories. Their purpose was strictly provisional: to reduce redundancy and begin the process of thematic comparison. In the political participation domain, for instance, early categories such as "Digital Avoidance" or "Symbolic Support" helped isolate codes that pointed to distinct participation logics. But these categories were not treated as conceptual units.

In several cases, category boundaries dissolved as the analysis progressed; in others, they folded into broader themes. Their value was organisational, not theoretical. The move from code to category to theme was never linear, and the category stage was ultimately discarded once theme definitions began to stabilise through memo testing and comparative reading. Appendix B2A and B2B also demonstrate the process from codes to categories. This process led to the development of four overarching themes of identity. The first, Cultural Identities, captured not only explicit references to Chinese culture but also far more complicated. The

obvious or quiet maintenance of life practices, values, or symbols that continued to shape participants' daily lives in the UK. This included codes like "Cultural Retention," "Media Preference," and "Regional Identity," all of which marked efforts to maintain origin. The theme did not assume cultural identity to be fixed; it was approached as a set of attachments, habits, and visibilities that remained important even when they were not actively displayed.

The second identity theme, National and Civic Identities, emerged through codes related to legal status, political belonging, and national or regional affiliation. These included references to citizenship, political rights, residency categories, and how participants saw themselves in relation to national imaginaries, both British and Chinese. The theme included positions such as "UK Citizen," "UK Resident," and "Chinese (Socially-Politically)," each representing a slightly different synthesis of identification. This theme required particular care in coding because many participants spoke about nationality in indirect or inconsistent ways. For instance, a participant might describe themselves as "not British" but still express investment in British local politics. Or one participant described himself/herself as a British Citizen, but actually he or she is only a resident with permanent residency. In such cases, coding choices were made based on narrative logic rather than strict terminology.

The third theme, Social Identities, focused on the roles participants occupied in relation to others: as parents, professionals, neighbours, or gendered subjects. These roles were rarely presented as static. Rather, they shifted depending on the situation being described. Codes like "Family Obligation," "Occupational Identity," "Class Position," and "Gender Identity" were all gathered into this theme, but not in a descriptive way. Instead, they were treated as lenses through which participants negotiated access, recognition, and respectability. One participant, for instance, described herself as "just a mother here," but later revealed the role she played in a community for the development of her children. The code was not changed, but the memo was updated to reflect the interactions between role and recognition.

The final identity theme, Intersectional and Values-Driven Identities, included those narratives shaped by overlapping social locations or normative commitments. These ranged from LGBTQ+ participants negotiating social and cultural expectations to migrants who described themselves as feminists, Christians, or environmentalists. What linked these cases was not their content, but the way they positioned identity in moral, ideological, or intersectional frameworks. Many of these codes appear only once or twice, but were recorded here for their

significance. These identities often stood in contrast to institutional definitions/understanding of social positions, and sometimes challenged the conventional assumptions.

Each of these four themes was iteratively reviewed and named. The names were chosen not only to describe what the themes contained, but to indicate how the themes functioned. "Cultural Identities" was not just about culture; it was about how culture was carried. "Social Identities" was not just about roles; it was about how those roles were made visible or invisble in context or environment. The naming process involved multiple revisions, some themes were renamed as their internal coherence shifted through further coding. All final themes and subcategories are presented in Appendix B2A.

In parallel, the same process was applied to political participation. Here, 17 initial codes were gradually reorganised into five participation themes. These themes did not reflect level of activity, but rather the logic and mode of engagement. As with identity, the aim was not to classify participants into types, but to understand how political presence, or absence, was expressed, modulated, or redirected.

The first participation theme, Formal and Institutional Political Engagement, included those who voted, attended council meetings, or participated in structured civic processes. These participants often linked engagement to legal status, typically British citizenship, and saw participation as a responsibility. Their narratives were relatively linear: "I became a citizen, so I vote." But even here, tone varied. Some described pride; others described obligation.The second theme, Networked and Digital Political Participation, captured a wider range of online or platform-based behaviours. Participants discussed politics in WeChat groups, followed news across borders using VPNs. These activities were cautious, strategic, and often layered. The third theme, Selective and Pragmatic Engagement, reflected cases where political involvement was linked to specific issues. A participant might attend a protest about racism, but avoid all discussion of party politics. Another might sign a petition about student visas but decline to vote or show support to other minorities. These patterns showed that political action was often shaped by practical stakes rather than ideological commitment. This theme required careful thematic boundary-setting, since some of these behaviours also appeared under digital participation or economic expression. So I used the word "pragmatic" to demonstrate the agency of participants and interpret the emotional or strategic alignments. The fourth theme, Strategic Disengagement and Political Apathy, included both stated refusal and quiet absence. Some participants said explicitly that they avoided politics to protect themselves or their

families. Others described feeling disappointed or disconnected. These cases challenged common assumptions about passivity or non-participation due to segregation. Disengagement, here, was not always a lack of interest or institutional exclusion, but a form of self-protection. The final theme, initially I named it Non-Traditional Political Expression, brought together symbolic, economic, and belief-based forms of engagement. I noticed that this naming made this theme more like a typology. So, I changed it to Value-Based Political Expression. This included buying Chinese brands to express patriotism, denying Russian goods for supporting peace, refusing to engage in secular politics due to religious belief, or participating in feminist or LGBTQ+ causes without affiliating with formal political organisations or Patriarchal-style communities.

The thematic organisation of these participation patterns involved the same logic as with identity. Some codes were difficult to allocate, as they appear to cross multiple themes or shift meaning depending on context. In these cases, they were defined with rooms for interpretation to allow for such ambiguity. The five themes, like the four identity themes, were not analytical endpoints, but structures—used to stabilise the next stage of analysis, in which identity and participation would be brought into direct relation. All nine themes, four for identity, five for participation, are listed and defined in Appendix B2B. They were constructed not for classification, but for comparison. Their value lies not in isolating positions but in making visible the ways identity and political engagement become across. The next stage of the analysis moves from these themes toward a two-axis model that allows this engagement to be traced more systematically.

The thematic structure developed here marks the analytical close of Chapter 4, but not the interpretive endpoint of this study. In keeping with the reflexive thematic analysis approach, themes are treated as analytic resources rather than fixed containers: they illuminate recurring patterns of meaning, but do not in themselves explain how these meanings are mobilised in practice. For a detailed analysis, a further theoretical concentration is required. The next stage is therefore to examine how the four identity themes—Cultural Identities, National and Civic Identities, Social Identities, and Intersectional and Values-Driven Identities—are reframed as strategic practices through which participants actively configure their self-presentation under constraint.

Each strategy is grounded in, but does not replicate, its originating theme: Cultural Anchoring Strategies build from the theme of Cultural Identities, shifting the focus from what cultural

elements are present to how they are tactically deployed or muted; Civic and National Positionalities extend from the theme of National and Civic Identities, showing how formal affiliations are selectively inhabited, withheld, or instrumentalised; Relational and Values-Driven Positionings integrate insights from both Social Identities and Intersectional/Values-Driven Identities, tracing how ethical commitments, family roles, and moral frameworks shape visibility and belonging; and Digital and Linguistic Modulation draws from expressions dispersed across all four themes, formalising them as an infrastructural strategy for calibrating expression and, indirectly, legibility for integration. These four strategic domains are read through the Expression × Integration lens developed in Chapter 3: Cultural Anchoring primarily modulates expression; Civic/National Positionalities primarily negotiate integration; Relational and Values-Driven Positionings operate across both axes; and Digital/Linguistic Modulation underpins movement across the field.

Chapter 5 develops these strategic domains to move from thematic mapping to a dynamic account of identity as continuously configured—combined, layered, or withheld—in response to shifting risks, audiences, and opportunities. The Chapter 5, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 will unfold this modulation and configuration in detail.

4.4.3 From Theme to Framework: Building Models of Identity–Participation Interaction Along Two Axes

After establishing themes, it is time to analyse themes in the finding chapters for the codebook thematic analysis. With these themes to be explained in detail with quotations from interviews and discussion of the potential findings, a PhD thesis will be written. However, this research, which applies reflexive thematic analysis, requires the researcher to interrogate deeply to interpret something behind the themes. How to connect identity dimensions with political patterns, or simply political expressions or participation action context, in these summarised political patterns, how identity expresses and constructs itself is the main task for reflexive thematic analysis. More importantly, it has already been established in chapter 3 that this analysis also follows the theoretical lens to develop an explanation for a mechanism to interpret participants' behaviours in the political context.

The structure that held them together was already laid out in Chapter 3. There, identity was framed not as a static attribute or a social label, but as a process—positioned along two axes: expression and integration. The first axis concerns the degree to which identity is made visible

in behaviour. Expression is not understood here as mere articulation, but forms of communicative positioning, such as performance, refusal, self-censorship, disidentification and more. It marks the distance between what one could say, and what one chose, or dared, to say. From this perspective, it is necessary to revisit how identity becomes visible during political participation and how this visibility evolves throughout the process.

The second axis, integration, refers to how individuals locate themselves in relation to broader institutional systems. Again, this is not a matter of legal status or behavioural adaptation. Integration, in this framework, includes alignment, disavowal or structural avoidance. Under this view of the point, it is valuable to interrogate how identity facilitates or prevents political participation, and this kind of co-construction positions migrants into where. Taken together, these two axes do not produce types of identity. They generate a space, a matrix of pressures and possibilities, within which identity is always in motion. Expression and integration are not orthogonal. They intersect, refract, and destabilise one another. A participant may become more expressive without integrating further. Or integration may increase even as expression remains muted. The logic is not developmental. It is relational. And it is from within this tension that participation begins to act, not as a consequence, but as a force against or to enhance barriers.

During the thematic coding process, I began to notice that identity expressions were rarely free-standing. They echoed previous acts of participation. They anticipated future ones. A participant who framed herself as "not political" might later describe helping organise student protests. One who said he "didn't know much" about democracy might recount a moment of strategic silence at a public online event. These shifts were not errors. They were signs of complicated interaction. Participation was not only an effect of identity; it was a regulator of how identity could be safely expressed and situated. Conversely, identity began to alter the terms on which participation was possible.

Initially, I viewed this relationship as a series of fluctuations, akin to oscillations between different positions. Identity would gravitate toward participation, then pull back, while participation would expand the bounds of identity only to retreat later. For instance, a migrant with a culturally Chinese identity might engage primarily in Chinese-related activities and remain indifferent to British politics. Yet, when an event disrupts their daily routine or affects their personal rights, they may adopt a new identity as a British resident or citizen and respond to British politics. Subsequently, their identity might shift again. This process resembles what

is called Project Identity (Castells, 1997) and aligns with Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001), where multiple "I-positions" can be activated by contextual factors. However, this kind of identity development is quite individual, influenced mainly by personal circumstances, not external forces. It resembles a pattern where identity moves from A to B, then to C, and possibly back to B or A. I initially termed this the oscillation model, as it emphasises situational reversion rather than continuous integration or internal dialogue, distinguishing it from both theories. This oscillation model became my working metaphor for several months. But it began to fail. The returns are with many uncertainties. For example, a participant who withdrew politically after a protest did not return to the same kind of silence. The silence was now marked by fear or disappointment. What looked like repetition was something else: looping, with a difference. And in some cases, the shift was not cyclical at all. It was directional, transformative. A before-and-after that could not be collapsed into modulation.

This was the moment when the analytic movement turned: from oscillation to loop, and from loop to spiral. Some participants moved within a framework, they adjusted and negotiated boundaries without significantly changing their core identities. Others, however, changed direction entirely. Participation did not just adjust their positions, but reordered them. This kind of movement gave rise to two core models. These were not conceived as static typologies, nor as ideal types. They are better understood as analytic paths—ways of mapping how identity and political participation co-constitute each other through different rhythms, risks, and structural entanglements.

The Model I is the Networked Political Model, which is loop-based identity adjustment within existing frameworks. This model describes a mechanism where participation works within a pre-existing identity boundary. That boundary may be stable or slightly selectively articulated. But it is not broken. Participation here is not revolutionary. It is modulatory—it loops back, affirming or amplifying certain aspects of identity without fully displacing its form. These cases tend to follow a basic chain of A → B → A′: A (an initial, often implicit self-positioning), B (a moment or form of political action), A′ (an identity reconfiguration that remains within the same framework, but may not be the same as A)

Within this model, three specific analytic trajectories emerged. The first one is the Convergence–Divergence Pathway. Here, political participation adjusts identity along the axis of integration. A participant might initially feel excluded, but through participation—such as voting, council meetings, or local organising—move closer to institutional or civic affiliation

(A → B → A′ integration). However, in this process, this participant does not change their original identity but adjusts it closer to local residents' rights. Conversely, participation may reinforce a sense of boundary, especially when exclusion, misrecognition, or racism are encountered in political spaces, leading to withdrawal or counter-identification. And this strengthens the original identity. In both directions, the framework remains intact. What shifts is proximity, not structure.

The second one is the Hybrid Identity Formation. This model describes participants who, through participation, assemble cross-contextual self-definitions. Exposure to new political systems or discourses (B) leads not to assimilation or rupture, but to layering. A Chinese civic sensibility may remain intact while UK political mechanisms are learned, mimicked, or tactically engaged. Identity here becomes A/B—a composite that does not seek synthesis. It is not transitional. It is operational.

The third form is the Latent Identity Activation model. This pattern describes cases where identity remains muted until catalysed. A participant might not describe herself as political, but a triggering event—a protest, policy change, or discriminatory encounter—awakens a form of self-understanding that was previously available but unclaimed. The shift from A to A′ here is not gradual. It is revealing. What was dormant becomes usable. The Latent Identity Activation model fits within the A → B → A′ schema in that it operates through a return to a previously held but dormant identity. This is a reclaiming rather than a reshaping structure. An individual has an identity initially, but fails to recognise it as the dominant identity. It remains within their original structure, but only barely.

The Model II is the Dialectical–Emergence Model, which is a spiral-based identity transformation through contradiction and rupture. In reality, not all cases followed the loop. Some participants did not return to a modulated self. They came to occupy a different position. Here, participation did not adjust identity. It interrupts it and reshapes it. These cases cannot be mapped as A → A′. They follow different chains: A → Φ: where identity collapses, withdraws, or is forcibly closed off; A → B → Religious Identity: where the site of self-understanding shifts domains entirely; A → B → C: where participation generates a new identity formation that cannot be traced back to A

I named the first one as the Political Fear Model. A participant may initially hold a dominant identity (A). But exposure to political risk—surveillance, social punishment, institutional

discrimination or segregation—triggers disengagement. The result is not adjustment, but closure (Φ). Political selfhood becomes illegible. Participants disappear from the field by protective needs. The second one is quite unique as the Spiritual Isolation Model. Here, identity is reconstituted through a different order. A participant's secular political identity (A) may encounter frustration, misrecognition, or fatigue. Participation (B) becomes a shelter from crisis. In response, identity moves not inward, but elsewhere—into religious frames, moral systems, or spiritual narratives. The political is not rejected but relocated. The final one is the Transformative Interaction Model. This is the only chain that moves beyond the self alone. Participation (B) is not just reactive. It opens a new field. A participant joins a movement, starts a community organisation or others. The result is not return or avoidance—it is C, a new self-positioning born in relation to others. The self becomes different through political actions.

These six models, which will be detailed discussed in Chapter 6, were shaped through repeated re-reading, memo writing, and across-case comparison. They arose where thematic proximity created tension, and where those tensions did not resolve into coherence. They do not map identities. They map movements: between speech and silence, presence and caution, structure and refusal.

I must reemphasise that, they are not categories or containers for data. They are frames of understanding—frames that hold the logics through which identity and political participation become interactive. The models do not ask who belongs where. They ask how the same person may pass through many of them. These models are not isolated. The engagement between identity and the political participation of a migrant fits model I in a period of time, and then may change to model II in a very short time.

An individual's predefined worldview and a specific incident or political event can rapidly alter the interaction between identity and political participation, resulting in a very different model in a short period. The combination of various models demonstrates considerable flexibility. I emphasise that these models serve as analytical frameworks rather than rigid topologies or categories. Regrettably, I lack the resources to track the lifespan of my interviewees. Making this model more comprehensive and reliable would be beneficial. This is a structural limitation of an unfunded doctoral project: without the resources for longitudinal engagement, the framework necessarily captures a cross-sectional configuration, rather than the full temporal arc of these movements. What was at stake, in the end, was not a method for sorting but a structure for attending to how migrants build selves that are strategic and sometimes defiant.

These models hold the loops, trace the spirals. And they remember that each turn carries what came before, even if it cannot return to it.

Traditional codebook or code reliability thematic analysis demands theoretical saturation; however, in reflexive thematic analysis, codes and themes emerged reflectively through process of interactive coding through three different rounds of coding. After the third round of analysis, it becomes evident that the current conceptual framework or the current models that try to analyse the interaction between identity and political participation cannot extend their interpretive capacity, which confirms their explanatory scope. Within a Reflexive Thematic Analysis framework (Braun and Clarke, 2019), such saturation is not defined by exhaustion, but by sufficiency. It is in this sense that the identity–participation framework reached saturation, not because the data stopped speaking, but because its underlying tensions had been named.

4.5 Reflexivity, Ethical Navigation, and Researcher Positionality

Ethics in this study was part of the research's architecture, designed not only to comply with formal standards but to respond to the political sensitivity of the field itself. This research was formally approved by the University of York's Research Ethics Committee and conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), with explicit attention to visual research protocols as set out by Prosser, Clark and Wiles (2008). However, the actual ethical practice unfolded less in documents than in pauses, glances, refusals, and recalibrated questions.

All participants received information sheets, carefully worded to reflect the non-institutional tone of the project, and briefed in advance on their rights—not just to consent, but to opt out at any stage, to skip questions without explanation, and to retrospectively retract parts of their expression. In politically charged contexts, the ability to withdraw is itself an ethical infrastructure (MacLure, 2013). Due to the high sensitivity of political discourse among first-generation mainland Chinese migrants, and in consultation with the ethics committee, written consent was waived. Verbal consent was obtained and recorded via anonymised field notes, in line with recommendations by Berg (2001) for research conducted in risk-laden or surveillance-adjacent environments. For many participants, signing a form—no matter how "confidential"—would have introduced traceability risk. Trust in this project was built not

through paperwork, but through dialogical framing, transparency of purpose, and the ability to withdraw in real time.

All data collection follows the strict anonymisation requirements of the ethical committee. Every participant was assigned a unique code. Moreover, any references to workplaces, organisations, or geographically identifying features were removed or paraphrased during transcription to ensure safety. Interview recordings, where permitted, were stored on encrypted servers maintained by the University of York. All original audio files were deleted after transcription to ensure safety. For interviews without audio recording permissions, I took handwritten notes, using abbreviated note and symbols to avoid the risk of traceability.

Visual materials also required special care. In keeping with visual ethics protocols (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2016) and the ethical committee's requirements, no participant-generated photographs were ever digitally stored. For auto-photography, participants were shown photos without them being stored. I recorded images using words instead. All visual interactions were recorded in descriptive notes, ensuring that image-based reflection became part of the narrative, not the manifest artefact.

Interview environments were participant-led. For online interviews, I used the University of York's institutional Zoom platform, applying end-to-end encryption, password access, and private waiting rooms. For in-person interviews, participants chose their preferred location. Most took place in semi-public venues—libraries, university meeting rooms, or quiet cafés—allowing both accessibility and discretion. Only one interview took place in a participant's home, at repeated invitation, and only after multiple prior interactions. Even then, spatial boundaries were carefully negotiated, with fieldnotes recording both comfort and the ethical weight of crossing into personal space. Small gestures mattered. Every in-person participant received a small gift—never monetary, always symbolic: a box of Chinese tea, a local notebook, or a British-made bookmark. These were not incentives. They were acknowledgements. They did not purchase participation. They were a thankful acknowledgement of participation. All gifts were bought by myself without funding from anywhere.

For reflectivity, there is no neutral researcher. This project, like its participants, was shaped by the politics itself. I am a first-generation migrant from Mainland China. I live and work in the UK. This thesis is written in English. I am affiliated with a Russell Group university. I was trained in standard academic English and political analysis. I speak Mandarin fluently but not

equally—I do so with the confidence of education, with the accent of standard Mandarin. I am Han Chinese. I am male. I move with ease through systems that exclude others. These things do not disqualify me. But they mark me. So, I have to be extremely cautious about every word I say, because there are so many power relations embedded within the relationship between my participants and me. I am a well-educated first-generation mainland Chinese immigrant, and I have quite good power-relational awareness as I come from a good university and I am studying politics as a PhD student, which means that my words and judgments towards this cohort may bring meaning to them. So, I have to be clear that I should not say something that may mislead them to understand that I will speak for them all or have a very clear political stand. Because I am 'a politics professional', my views on politics can be seen as a kind of authority for them. More importantly, I have to treat my participants equally, to make them know that I am a collector who is researching their political attitudes and behaviour, but I am also a part of them, with no essential differences between us as first-generation Chinese migrants. Without mutual trust, some hidden meanings can cause injury when being expressed and interpreted later.

I can speak Mandarin clearly in a standard way, which means that I may come from a Han Chinese ethnicity and have a very good family background. This is also a more powerful relationship when I am facing someone from an underrepresented group or who was formerly an undocumented immigrant. I have to be extremely careful about every word I say, and not show any unintended disrespect to them. When facing people from ethnic minorities, I have to be very careful about how to pronounce their names and how to treat them equally as an immigrant from the same country with similar cultures, instead of treating them as others.

Moreover, as a male, it is impossible for me to understand all strategic choices, institutional barriers, discrimination, or sexual harassment met or encountered by females or those from LGBTQ backgrounds. We are definitely facing different social surroundings and have different problems, even though we often have to deal with similar challenges. So, I was careful to remind myself during the whole interview process to remain sensitive to gender issues and not to pretend to a knowledge that I did not have in relation to gender or sexuality, while always being open to learning from their lived experience.

Participants sometimes saw in me a mirror. Sometimes a channel. Sometimes a threat. Several began their interviews with comments like "I think you'll understand this," or "You've been through this too." That familiarity helped, but it also created expectations. The expectation that I would agree. I would translate their caution into clarity that I would "represent" something.

But I cannot claim a unified 'we,' and this study does not speak for the Chinese diaspora. It listens to its fractures. In moments where the risk of projection felt high, especially when discussing sensitive political experiences, I introduced AI-generated images. These were designed to represent ambiguous scenes of protest, policy, or participation, without reference to specific places or people. Before showing them, I explicitly told participants that these images were not objective. They were algorithmically biased, trained on aesthetic and cultural assumptions.

But I also told them something else: that because the images were generated by a machine, and not by me, they might feel less judgmental, more distant. They were not mirrors, and so perhaps they were safer. This strategy worked differently for different participants. Some ignored the images entirely. Others spoke to them as if they were prompts from memory. Several noted, explicitly, that the image "felt more neutral than a question". I did not always feel in control of the interview dynamic. One politically active participant offered a series of responses that corresponded almost too perfectly with the identity–participation models later developed in this thesis. This participant's language was confident, well-framed, and almost ready-made for academic citation. Toward the end of the interview, this participant said clearly: "You don't need to anonymise me. I want this on record. We need (a) voice from academia."

In that moment, I paused—not just the interview, but my role. Was I being asked to analyse or to amplify? Was this data or message? After re-reading the transcript and recalling my reactions several times, I made the decision to exclude that segment from analysis. It was not that I distrusted the content. But I could no longer hear it as emergent. It was a performance, and it asked something of me that exceeded the bounds of interpretation. To honour reflexivity sometimes means to refrain and abandon. To show the analytical process, I also included an example of the memos. See Appendix C for reference.

The limitations of this project are not statistical. They are structural. They come not from small sample size, but from the inevitable partiality of perspective. While this research claims to incorporate visual methods, I have to acknowledge that the actual use of images was heavily constrained. Due to both the sensitivity of the participants and the strict requirements of the University Ethics Committee, no participant-generated images were stored, and no visual materials could be presented in this thesis. As a result, photographs in this project served more as facilitators of conversation than as objects of analysis. As a result, visual elements here functioned primarily as elicitation devices rather than as independent artefacts for formal visual

analysis. This is a pity, but also necessary.This limitation means that I could not analyse any systematic colour symbolism or aesthetic style. The analysed material of this research is still a word-based transcript. While the visual design of the research was methodologically innovative, it was not a fully creative or interpretive visual study.

The participant sample, while diverse in background, skewed toward the highly educated, urban, and linguistically confident. Male participants were underrepresented, as were older migrants and those from working-class or industrial occupations. This was not incidental. It is partly a reflection of my own networks—those shaped through universities, diasporic cultural forums, and digital platforms that require a certain fluency to navigate. But it is also a reflection of me. Of whom I am more likely to be approached by. Of those who are more likely to perceive me as "safe," "understanding," or "not worth the effort." I attempted outreach in regional community centres, labour advocacy networks, and support groups for older migrants. However, in those spaces, I was often perceived as institutional—not unfriendly, but unfamiliar. People from the established communities kept asking me if I had a background with the Chinese government, if I received funds from UK research authorities, or if I had any connections with intelligence agencies, either in China or the UK. Even though I explained that I'm not affiliated with any of those, my only connection is with the University of York, which is an independent institution, they remained sceptical about my identity. They feel that it is quite strange for a young man without any findings to attempt to research and speak on their behalf.

My own limitations were not methodological alone. They were emotional. In interviews where fear was palpable, where references to surveillance or family back home surfaced, I sometimes moved on too quickly. I respected the silence, but I also retreated from it. There were times when I could have stayed longer, asked again, or simply waited. But I did not. And that, too, is part of this record.

A further limitation lies in the temporal design of this project. Conducted under the financial and logistical constraints of unfunded doctoral research, it was not possible to sustain a long-term longitudinal study. The analysis therefore rests on a cross-sectional snapshot of identity and political participation at a particular moment in time. The narratives and results presented in this thesis are often shaped by past experiences or expected futures of interviewees rather than traced through repeated engagement. A longitudinal design—returning to the same

participants across electoral cycles, political events, or changes in personal circumstances could provide a more dynamic view of how identity and participation co-evolve, diverge, or converge over time. In that sense, the findings here should be understood as relational and confined to their temporal context, rather than as depicting the entire trajectory of change. Based on what I have right now, I could not solve this problem. I am always looking forward to future continuous research.

This section has not offered closure. Instead, it has made visible the conditions under which this research became possible: ethically, affectively, and structurally. It has named the constraints, not to excuse them, but to understand how knowledge—like identity is always situated, partial, and relational.

If the earlier chapters asked how first-generation mainland Chinese migrants express identity and negotiate political belonging, this one turns the question back. It asks what it means to hear those expressions—when to trust, when to translate, and when to hold back. In the field of migration and participation research, ethics is not a checklist. It is a practice of remaining accountable to the asymmetries that cannot be resolved. This study does not claim neutrality. But it does claim attentiveness. And that, in this context, is the most that can be asked.

Chapter 5 Diversity Breeds Complexity: Configuring Selfhood among First-Generation Mainland Chinese Migrants in the UK

5.1 Introduction

For the first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants in this study, identity never quite settles that easily. It does not arrive pre-packaged, nor does it unfold as a clear narrative with boundaries. Often, it hesitates, hides, adjusts or even refuses to appear altogether.

This chapter begins with those hesitations to analyse through four strategies abstracted from themes developed in Chapter 4. The empirical ground for this chapter was laid in Chapter 4, which used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2022) to derive four core identity themes from interview data: Cultural Identities, National and Civic Identities, Social Identities, and Intersectional and Values-Driven Identities. These themes emerged inductively, not through predetermined frameworks, but through codes that were defined through detailed reading, comparison and reflection. Each theme illuminated how participants positioned themselves in relation to the world.

But this chapter does not return to those themes to retell them. It moves away from the simple thematic description and begins the work of strategic reconstruction. The four sections that follow—Cultural Anchoring, Civic and National Positionalities, Relational and Values-Driven Strategies, and Digital and Linguistic Modulation—do not mirror the four identity themes of Chapter 4. Instead, they are built from them. They represent a shift from descriptive grouping to analytic abstraction. Where Chapter 4 showed what kinds of identity talk appeared in the data, Chapter 5 asks: what was this talk doing? What was being managed, protected, calibrated?

In that sense, this chapter doesn't assume that identity is possessed—it believes it is practised, under constraint. As Hall (1996a) writes, identity is not an already accomplished fact, but always in process, always positioned. And for migrants navigating institutional suspicion, algorithmic visibility, or political untranslatability, that process is not neutral.

This chapter, then, unfolds not as a typology but as a map of strategies. Each section in this chapter builds directly from one of the four identity themes constructed in Chapter 4, while reframing them as dynamic and strategic dimensions of identity practice. Section 5.2 expands upon the theme of *Cultural Identities* by developing it into Cultural Anchoring Strategies—not as evidence of fixed heritage, but as situated tactics through which migrants secure emotional continuity or mark symbolic boundaries. Section 5.3 reconstructs *National and Civic Identities* as Civic and National Positionalities, highlighting how institutional affiliations and passport regimes are not adopted wholesale, but selectively inhabited, withheld, or performed in ways that negotiate visibility and risk. Section 5.4 draws from the theme of *Social Identities* and fuses it with values-based expressions from *Intersectional and Values-Driven Identities*, producing Relational and Values-Driven Positionings—a framework in which family roles, religious attachments, moral and belief systems, and professional positions become instruments of ethical self-definition and strategic deferral.

Section 5.5, while drawing from all four themes, formalises the dispersed digital and linguistic behaviours noted throughout the data into a distinct analytical lens: Digital and Linguistic Modulation, where expression is systemised through platform, language, and algorithm in order to manage audience, legibility, and exposure. None of this replaces the analytical framework and findings from Chapter 4 and the contexts mentioned in Chapter 1. Rather, it is the completed version of it. As Braun and Clarke (2022) remind us, thematic analysis is not the end of analysis—it is the platform upon which theory is constructed. This chapter systematically explores four different dimensions for analysis, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of identity as a process of construction rather than a topology, and identifies factors that influence identity formation.

The chapter concludes in Section 5.6 by returning to these strategies not as separable choices, but as modular components—selectively activated, sometimes contradictory, often simultaneous. The expression and integration of the analytical model is further explained in the context of identity strategies: how this model maps practices through four strategies across four themes. It prepares the ground for Chapter 6, which moves from identity construction to political participation, not as an extension, but as a consequence of these constraints.

To ask "who are they?" is too flat a question. The better one, perhaps, is this: How does one live a self that is always being moved by others' expectations, and still remain partially legible, partially protected, and, sometimes, partially free?

5.2 Cultural Anchoring Strategies

For many participants in this study, culture did not arrive as a loud statement. It is something embedded in their daily life; however, how to demonstrate that cultures can have different strategies. It wasn't always a choice. It was often a way to stay oriented in unfamiliar or unstable environments.

This section traces how participants used cultural practices not as markers of identity, but as forms of anchoring—to settle, to remain intact, to hold some part of the self in place. These strategies were not declarations of loyalty or pride. Most of the time, they were practical. Protective. Measured. And deeply strategic. Especially in the later section, I will unfold why people with Chinese cultural identity can have totally different orientations.

Cultural anchoring did not take one form. It is usually the way that an individual reflects itself to position itself in the new environment with Cultural elements. For some, it means making their difference tangible before it could be misrecognised. For others, it meant keeping that difference quietly and setting a boundary. For others, culture was not only about nationalities but also about locality, being Cantonese, eating spicy food or speaking as basic dialogue. Cultural identity can also be practical. Sometimes, showing oneself as a minority is a good way to safeguard one's position.

What follows are four patterns observed across these accounts: Culturally Active Assertion, Culturally Passive Endurance, Regional Anchoring, and Multicultural Switching. These are not categories of demographics. They are modes of staying grounded, especially when the ground is shifting.

5.2.1 Culturally Active Assertion

There were participants who did not wait to be asked who they were. Instead, they found ways to say it first—sometimes with language, more often with behaviours. It wasn't always a matter of pride. Sometimes, it was habit. Sometimes, it was protection. But it was almost always

intentional. These acts did not appear extraordinary. Like a used assertion in the title, this indicates an active strategy to demonstrate one's position. Throughout the materials, I discovered that an identity has been embraced by several participants—Chinese Identity (Culturally/Active). Chinese identity or Chineseness in migrant studies is already being perceived as a unified concept. However, in my research, I found that the Chinese identity is quite a multi-layered and complex concept which can be interpreted from various perspectives, and even within a single dimension, individuals may adopt different strategies towards it. This identity implies that many first-generation Chinese migrants from mainland China actively show off their Chinese cultural identity to maintain their uniqueness or set boundaries.

One participant P24 (Male, PhD) expressed this by showing me a picture of hoodies with traditional Chinese paintings that "you know sometimes I feel very strange feeling when I walk on the street as a Chinese. Everyone is different from me, so I am the most special one. That's something super Cool, right? And unlike some other minorities, many Chinese cultural elements are very beautiful and attractive. I'd love to wear hoodies with traditional Chinese calligraphy or paintings, and when someone encounters me, they may find it very interesting. I can explain it to them, and I think that's the most significant aspect of my identity, so I will always be proud of my Chinese heritage." I asked him further about his own community, "but if someone thinks you are exotic or sees you as a troublemaker, will you still consider this a good strategy to show your Chinese cultural identity?"

He replies: "I don't think so. I think that is why some minorities can have a better position in society because they like to show their culture and ignore others' feelings. Being unique means you have special value to society. Sometimes I know that in many institutional settings, we are symbols or decorations for the equality and diversity requirements. But I don't care about it (if) I gain what I need."

Similar expressions have also been recorded in the speech from participant P5 (Female, Administrative staff). By showing a photo of her, dressed in a traditional Chinese costume, attending the Chinese New Year celebration: "I love to organise traditional Chinese culture events for my colleagues. They feel that I can bring something new to them, and in the UK setting, I cannot challenge their rules, but I can try to adapt to them, and you have something to show is something better for me, it is a strategy for me to fulfil their anticipation of me."

These two statements clearly show our strategy that cultural identity can be a tool for minorities to maintain their uniqueness. However, another participant also expressed the same identity with a different purpose. Participant P19 (Female, Administrative staff) showed me a photo of a bath towel from North-eastern China and stated: "I brought this from my hometown and I forced my British boyfriend to use it. I said Chinese, especially a north-eastern Chinese. I couldn't forget my origins, to know where I come from is the most important thing for my future life. We are culturally different, and we're just different."

Expressing active Chinese cultural affiliation sometimes can also be seen as a protective mechanism when encountering British culture. Participant P7 (Female, Lecturer) told me: "I feel British people, especially well-educated British people, are hard to get along with. It is difficult to understand their real meanings. Even my boyfriend, a PhD student, was impressed by China's prosperity when I brought him back to China, but he still insisted on the stereotype non-democratic system. I feel it is hypocritical. I prefer to be myself as a Chinese, not British."

Every time I read these statements; I feel that the resilience of the first-generation mainland Chinese immigrants is quite strong. Even though they face considerable institutional discrimination and some unrealistic expectations from their surroundings, they still actively use their personal advantages to cope with these challenges. In many of these cases, culture functioned less like an expression and more like a screen—delicate, partially transparent, but still structuring the interaction. By foregrounding familiar, legible signs of "Chineseness," participants could choose how they appeared, and to some extent, why. But these gestures were not expressive, but tactical. They allowed participants to manage how others approached them and how they approached their surroundings. In this sense, cultural assertion wasn't about proving identity, but using identity to struggle for more room.

In multicultural Britain, difference is often welcomed—but only when it is tidy, accessible, and safely contained (Ahmed, 2012). For many migrants, this meant learning how to perform culture in ways that would be recognised. Being the "friendly Chinese colleague" or the "tea-giving neighbour" or someone as a "charming exotic sample" was a way of entering social spaces without triggering discomfort or misunderstandings. However, it required performance, and not always aligned with personal desire, as in P5's case.

5.2.2 Culturally Passive Endurance

Not everyone wants to show who they are. Some people choose not to say anything unless they have to. They keep things quiet—not because they are unsure, but because speaking often makes things more complicated. Passively consuming Chinese cultural heritage is a strategy for them to merge the boundary between themselves and the host society or their surroundings. Among participants in this study, there were several who spoke about their Chinese identity in this quieter way. They didn't reject it, and they didn't exactly hide it either. It was in the background, but rarely brought to the fore unless someone asked. It wasn't shame, and it wasn't pride. It was something in between.

Often, they would say things like "it's just how I grew up," or "I don't think about it much." But when you looked closely, cultural practices were still present, just not emphasised. These participants still cooked Chinese food, still followed WeChat news, still decorated their homes for Spring Festival. They just did not make it public. Sometimes, they were even surprised to find themselves explaining these things during the interview.

Participant P37 (Female, start-up business owner) provided a vivid example with a photo of her Chinese-style bedsheet: "You must be familiar with this, I suppose everyone in my generation has a similar one at home. You know, in the workplace, all my husband brings me to the social events, I try my best to speak the Queen's accent, although I'm still mocking it. I tried to be local, try to talk about how busy I am, and try to pretend to be a person with Britishness. But you know, at home, I still want to maintain something that makes me feel that I'm still Chinese." For them, culture wasn't a performance—it was a way of living. But also, a way of not making things harder than they already were. Several people mentioned that showing too much could bring attention, or questions, or sometimes make others uncomfortable. So instead of asserting their Chinese identity, they adapted.

Participant P8 (Male, Lecturer), by showing me a poster of a joker, said: "I hope to be a joker or in my colleagues' minds I am just a joker, a very funny guy without any offensive behaviours or statements at all. Very tricky, right? Sometimes I even pretend to be Japanese or Korean, or I try to show them that I'm not very good at English and I do not want to engage in a dialogue. I know I'm Chinese and I live in a Chinese way. But I never care about whether people see me as Chinese or not."

This kind of passive endurance was not apolitical or indifferent. It was often about keeping things simple in a world where identity can easily become complicated. These participants were careful. They knew when to step forward and when to stay back. They were not disengaged—they were just choosing not to make their cultural identity the centre of attention.

5.2.3 Regional Anchoring

While some participants spoke of being "Chinese" as a whole, others didn't feel that label was specific enough. For them, the sense of cultural identity didn't come from a national idea—it came from something smaller, more familiar, and often more emotionally charged: where they were from in China. This kind of regional anchoring was accompanied by accent, food or lifestyles. These social acts were meaningful. They showed that identity, for many participants, was held more tightly in local memories than in national ones.

The participant P1(Female, Administrative Staff) showed me a photo of soy sauce from Guangdong province: "Do you know the seasoning? This is a type of soya sauce from the Guangdong province. As a Cantonese, I need it. I always emphasise myself as a Cantonese, especially in the UK. You know, there are lots of people from Hong Kong, and even though my dialect is different from their language in Hong Kong, they can understand me, and it may make me feel a little bit familiar. Also, due to some political reasons, they do not want to accept me into their community, but that's enough for me. It is a sense of hometown."

What was especially clear in her account was that being "Cantonese" offered her a point of clarity, not only in how she saw herself, but in how she positioned herself in the Chinese community in the UK. When much of the public-facing Chinese culture in Britain was shaped by Hong Kong migration, she described feeling a sense of hometown. Others spoke about dialects, food, or TV shows they grew up with. One participant described how watching the CCTV Spring Festival Gala—known for its north-eastern humour and musical numbers—was a difficult part of her new year.

P17 (Female, Behavioural Scientist), another participant from Guangdong, said: "Sometimes in the UK I feel that the culture is closer to me. I'm not talking about the mainstream culture but about the Cantonese culture. You know, in China, because the political centre is in Beijing, most of the cultures promoted by the Chinese central television are cultures from the north. It is hard for me to understand the northeastern humour at the spring festival gala. But here in the

UK, I feel that I'm closer to authentic Cantonese culture because older Chinese immigrants left Guangdong and went to Hong Kong very early."

What these accounts suggest is that regional identity functioned as a micro-scale anchoring strategy. It made culture smaller, closer, and easier to carry. When "Chineseness" felt too broad, or too politically loaded, region-based identity became a way to reclaim specificity—on their own terms.

5.2.4 Multicultural Switching

Not every participant saw culture as a stable thing they belonged to. For some, it was something they moved between—sometimes daily, sometimes even within the same conversation. They did not talk about being "in-between cultures." They talked about knowing when to be what and with whom. For them, cultural identity is negotiable; they are sophisticated and switch themselves and adapt themselves into complicated contexts. This kind of switching wasn't framed as confusion. It was deliberate and often highly skilled. At home, they might speak Mandarin or a regional dialect. At work, they shifted to English—sometimes formal, sometimes softened to match the tone of their team. With some friends, they talked politics. With others, they talked about bubble tea and family. It wasn't about pretending. It was about managing comfort, risk, and connection.

Participant P12 (Female, HR), an experienced HR professional, said: "My English is not good enough, but in the workplace, I'm not afraid of speaking English to my British colleagues. I told him, if you cannot understand what I'm talking about, that's your problem, not mine." This reflects quite a professional and harsh attitude in British style, rather than the humble Chinese manner. However, she also mentioned that when hanging out with Chinese friends, "Sometimes I will choose to pay the bill for everyone. I come from Shandong province. In my hometown, if you do not pay for the bill, people may recognise that you are not respectful enough."

I confirmed this by re-asking her about her attitudes towards colleagues in professional settings and in relationships with her Chinese peers. And she confirmed that my understanding is completely right. Her behaviours were more situational. These were not identity crises. They were pragmatic adjustments, depending on what the space required or allowed.

For many, the UK was not just a host society. It was a patchwork of cultural environments—university, workplace, neighbourhood, WeChat, WhatsApp, religious groups, and international student forums. Each came with its own norms. Switching was not about losing identity. It was about staying mobile, staying safe, and staying effective.

In her case, switching was also about avoiding misreadings. Sometimes she would act more "Western" in multicultural settings to pre-empt questions about politics. Sometimes she would deliberately lean into "Chinese" mannerisms in front of certain friends—just enough to be recognised, but not enough to be labelled. This kind of switching did not mean they were unsure of who they were. Quite the opposite. It meant they were highly aware of how others saw them and had learned how to move across frames without losing too much in the process. In that sense, identity was not something they carried—it was something they adjusted to fit, survive, and sometimes resist.

5.2.5 Summary

Across these accounts, cultural identity was something my research participants used—gently, tactically, and at times, with great care. For many, the idea of "being Chinese" did not come from official narratives or ethnic categories, but from local anchors: regional heritages. And for some, identity wasn't something to fix at all—it was something to switch, as the moment required. Cultural expression became a tool not of proclamation, but of positioning: to say just enough, to hold back what felt unsafe, to claim space without drawing too much attention. They were shaped by how participants had learned to read their surroundings and how they anticipated others might read them. In that sense, culture wasn't simply a matter of memory or origin. It was a way to survive visibility.

Analytically, On the two-axis map, cultural anchoring operates on both expression (amplifying or softening cultural cues) and integration (signalling selective proximity or distance to local communities and institutions); in practice it typically pairs with digital–linguistic modulation to stage those cues, and with civic/national positionalities when cultural signs are mobilised as claims to place. In the next section, we move from these everyday practices of cultural anchoring to a different layer of identity work: how participants engaged—or did not engage—with the institutional frameworks of citizenship, legal status, and national affiliation. Where culture provided an effective home, civic and national identities brought new kinds of decisions in a formal or even heavy way.

5.3 Civic and National Positionalities

For many participants in this study, the more difficult decisions came not from what they ate, or spoke, or remembered, but from how they allocate their positions within the institutional system. What passport they hold, what election they choose to vote in, and what kinds of political expressions can be accepted or deemed safe. This section turns to identity as it is mediated through institutional affiliation: national belonging, citizenship status, and legal residency.

Some spoke of themselves as still "politically Chinese," even after living in the UK for years. It is not because they are still fans of the Chinese Communist Party, but rather due to the familial ties many have with the PRC. For some who haven't been naturalised, transnational surveillance and intangible fears are still pervasive. Others with British citizenship feel a sense of segregation, yet they cannot abandon their British passports, as these may offer more advantages, so they utilise their British identity as a means to engage in public events and gain recognition. Many find themselves in a blurred in-between space: residents, taxpayers, or service users of the local council. They joined what needed to be joined and stepped back from the rest.

None of these strategies followed a clear rule. What united them was a shared awareness that being legible to the state—any state—always comes with risk. Visibility means exposure. Belonging means expectation. And so, participants learned to calibrate: sometimes using their institutional status to participate, sometimes muting it to stay out of the centre, and sometimes refusing to acknowledge its meaning altogether. In the following three sections, I explore how participants positioned themselves within—and sometimes against—the formal structures of national and civic identity. These identities are strategies of alignment, position, and negotiation.

5.3.1 Socially–Politically Chinese

For some participants, political identity was not something they chose. It was not something they declared either. This seems like a natural born identity or symbol attached to them. Even after years of living in the UK, building careers, speaking English, and even obtaining British passports, there remained a kind of ghost alignment—not to a government, but to a structure.

These participants did not always speak of "China" with pride or loyalty, but with a complicated feeling. This is a kind of deeply socialised sense of what should be said or shouldn't and why.

Participant P35 (Female, Small Grocery Store owner) told me, "I came to the UK in 1990s; you couldn't imagine that when I was in China, I was a university teacher and a former CCP member. For some reason, I left China in the 1990s. Having been trained in the CCP system for about 15 to 18 years, I know the power of that structure. My parents are still alive and they're living in China. My younger brother is a civil servant in China, and the reason I, his sister, live overseas is that he cannot even get a promotion. Also, I already have a British passport, but politically, I'm still Chinese; I have too many concerns and constraints."

During the interview, I felt she was assessing risk. Her choice to avoid discussing specific topics was not about belief—it was about how political visibility had always come with consequences, even across borders. For her, the danger was not direct. There was no one watching, but a socialised structure still existed.

This feeling is shared by many other participants. P40(Male, Chef) described how his parents regularly reminded him to stay "low-profile" online. He had lived in the UK for over a decade, but his relatives were still in China. "Even if I'm here," he said, "they're still there. And they could be affected by what I do. Every time I enter China with a British passport I feel that the immigration officer treats me like a suspect. To be honest, I'm a little bit regretful to be a British citizen. Sometimes people in China do not trust us. They think that you are a traitor of the country; however, some British people in my community say you are a Chinese spy." He added that this was not paranoia—it was common sense, shaped by years of watching what happened to people who spoke too much and distrust from both home and host society. For him, political silence was not avoidance. It was a responsibility. His sense of self was not national, but relational, stretched across family ties, across geographies. His "Chineseness" was not an identity he wore. It was a structure he did not want to endanger. And sometimes this structure may also strengthen his Chinese identity politically and socially. This is a kind of recognition from the UK society.

A third participant, P15 (Male, Data analyst), did not mention China directly at all—until he saw the picture of the social movement during the Photo-elicitation interview. When asked about protests in the UK, he paused, smiled slightly, and said, "I don't think I should talk about

that. You understand." He didn't need to say more. The silence said enough. That kind of moment occurred more than once. It was not fear in the dramatic sense; rather, it was something more ordinary and perhaps more powerful. Personally, I share the same feeling as many of them, so it is difficult for me to claim that my interpretation of this aspect of the interview is 100% objective. However, by reflecting several times through interview memos and transcripts, I can confirm that these interviewees still embrace their Chinese identity socially and politically. They continue to adhere to social norms as Chinese citizens. They strive to behave gently and carefully to meet the expectations of both the Chinese and UK governments. One requires loyalty; the latter demands morality.

However, being Chinese politically and socially is not always associated with fear. As participant P33 (Female, Casual worker) highlighted, "I don't care about secular politics, but after living in the UK for over 20 years, I feel that democracy is also a hypocritical lie. I definitely know the situation of the Chinese government, but I didn't see anything so different between China and the UK. I don't really trust authority, no matter where it is. That's also the reason why I chose to only hold permanent residency instead of citizenship. I'm always politically a Chinese with a Chinese passport and have the possibility to relocate back."

These participants didn't call themselves "politically Chinese." They did not perform ideology. But they lived within a political field shaped by the afterlife of authoritarianism. Not because they wanted to—but because the past had not quite let go. And in this way, even silence became an expression: of care, of containment, of not wanting to risk what had already been learned.

5.3.2 British Citizenship Performance

For some participants, being a British citizen was not about belonging. It was about being allowed to do things. Voting, accessing benefits, applying for jobs, and explaining oneself to institutions. A passport did not change how they felt, but it changed how they were seen—and what they could or could not do. Interviewees did not always describe this as strategic. But the pattern was clear. Britishness was performed when it was needed. In all interview data, there were only three participants who firmly emphasised their British citizenship, two for political mobilisations, another only for a better life.

Participant P13 (Female, Journalist, British Citizen) said: "The British citizenship gave me a second life. When I first came to the UK, I didn't realise the reality of the Chinese government.

But working as a journalist for years, I thought that most of the Chinese people are just half persons; they are not educated and know nothing about social science. I met lots of British Chinese people there who dare not speak out and do not say anything related to politics. They are living in the UK, but they're still Chinese. But actually, if you are living in this society, you have to contribute to this society. It is a shame for you to receive the benefits from this country and still condemn it while embracing your home country. And that's why, as a journalist, I wanted to write more articles to reveal the reality of the Chinese government and encourage people to participate in politics. We are British citizens. This citizenship has totally changed my life and given me a second political life."

During the interview, this interviewee also became increasingly agitated. She criticised the Chinese government a lot. So, in my notes, I wrote that I should be objective and try to use quotations that seem objective. However, her words are valuable in revealing that British citizen identity is more than a legal statute but encompasses social expectations and democratic values. It also means opportunities in politics and chances to speak out freely. It is not a kind of category, but a door for new opportunities.

Another participant, P 27 (Male, Councillor): "Firstly, I have to confirm that I'm a British citizen, I only have the British passport, I do not have a Chinese passport. And more importantly, I am a councillor and I am just coincidentally Chinese."

His tone was very cautious, and he tried to convince me that he did not have dual citizenship. He aligned closely with British values, allowing him to be a calm figure in local politics and demonstrate these values to society. This also proves that British Citizen identity is a tactical tool. For some first-generation mainland Chinese, this identity can bring opportunities, but it still has to be used wisely. For him, citizenship was not only a transformation. It was a layer— used when helpful, removed when personal. He had learned what was expected. He gave just enough to make the system work for him, but never confused legal paperwork with identity. His sense of self was elsewhere.

Citizenship not only brings political opportunities, but also opportunities in daily life. Participant P39 (Male, Chef) explained: "I got the British passport because my daughter was born here. For schooling, you need it. For voting, okay. But for me? No. Honestly, I never feel I'm part of it. I'm Chinese politically." He paused, then added, "This is just a paper. It doesn't change how I behave. And I am only a small figure. I don't care about it."

In both cases, the passport is not a marker of arrival. It is a practical interface—a way of managing institutions, smoothing interactions, avoiding suspicion. At times, it was even used ironically. P 39 also joked that "Britishness is useful, especially when applying for a mortgage." The tone was light. But the point was sharp: identity is not always what you feel. Sometimes, it is what you hand over.

This kind of positioning is more complex than the multicultural switching strategies I described earlier. Cultural switching often happens fluidly, sometimes without consequence. But citizenship is different. It is formal, legal, and heavy. It comes with paperwork, documents, and expectations of loyalty. You can speak English or Mandarin depending on context, but you cannot casually perform or withdraw from citizenship. It is not just cultural—it is institutional. That is why British and Chinese political identities cannot be seen as blended. They run parallel. They co-exist, but they do not combine.

For many participants, then, British citizenship was neither rejection nor arrival. It was a negotiated platform—a legal shell to inhabit when needed, a surface that could be shown without exposing too much underneath. And in that space between visibility and detachment, identity became not a declaration, but a decision—a quiet balancing act between two systems that never fully touched.

5.3.3 Functional Residency

Some participants did not talk about identity at all. When asked about politics, citizenship, or nationality, they often shifted the topic. But they had lived in the UK for years, paid taxes, sent their children to school, used public health services. They were here—not as guests, not as campaigners, but as residents. And that was enough. This kind of positioning was not passive. It was strategic. For them, "residency" was a functional interface—something that allowed access, security, and routine, without requiring any political or emotional investment. They did not need to become British. They just needed to live well, stay safe, and avoid drawing too much attention.

Participant P16 (Female, Restaurant manager) said: "I have lived in Scotland for 25 years. I have permanent residency. I didn't see any difference between me and other British citizens. More importantly, in Scotland, we can vote in local elections. So, I can contribute to society or the community. I come from a totally different country, and for me to get the kind of National

Federation is very hard, but I clearly know my affiliation with the local community, and I frequently organise community events to promote a green, healthy lifestyle, and I also encourage my children to do so."

Participant P4 (Male, Engineer) also explained that "I always feel that I'm a resident of Edinburgh. The city brings a lot to me; I studied there, worked there, and I'm trying to buy my new house there. I am not an apolitical person. Just for safety reasons, I haven't got my citizenship. Residency cannot safeguard me, but I enjoy it. Being a citizen definitely strengthens my connection with my local neighbourhoods. And if they do need a petition or anything, I can help; I will do it."

He emphasised: "I have my work, my family, my routine. As long as I follow the rules, I don't need to care about those things." For him, the idea of high-level participation felt unnecessary. The system worked best when it was left alone.

This attitude did not come from apathy. It came from experience. Many participants had lived through political instability or bureaucratic exhaustion. In Britain, they found something better: predictability. Institutions that mostly functioned. Procedures that could be followed. And they did not want to complicate that by stepping into symbolic roles they did not trust or understand.

Some even found comfort in invisibility. One participant (P22, administrative staff, sales) said: "I am a British citizen. However, I feel that I'm more like a resident of York only. I don't care too much about national politics because I have been out of China for quite a long time. I don't care about Chinese politics. I pay tax, and I do everything correctly. But I don't talk too much. I've seen what happens when people try to stand out. It's not always worth it." For them, being "just a resident" meant not being a target. It enabled them to survive the system without being claimed by it.

What emerged in these accounts was not disengagement. It was calibration. These participants knew where the borders were of law, of culture, of recognition. They stayed within them, quietly. And in that quiet, they created space: not for political expression, but for continuity, for family, for a life that did not need to be explained. In this deliberate quiet, identity still moved, just not through the state. Instead, it found shape in other spaces: family, religion, work. These become the focus of the next section.

5.3.4 Summary

Across these accounts, being British—or not being Chinese anymore—was never a clear line. Political identity did not follow citizenship. Legal status did not mean emotional belonging. What people had been in positions, not final answers.

Some described themselves as still Chinese in a political sense, not because they agreed with everything, but because certain fears or responsibilities never left. Others used British citizenship when it helped and ignored it when it did not matter. For some, simply being a resident was enough. They worked, paid taxes, followed the rules, engaged with local or community-level politics and preferred to stay out of political life. None of them was passive. They were all making decisions—about how much to show, how much to say, and when to stay quiet. What tied these strategies together was not a search for identity, but a need to manage position. They were not trying to belong or to leave. They were trying to live safely, calmly, without losing too much of themselves.

Analytically, civic and national positionalities centre on integration while engaging both axes: they recalibrate integration via status and institutional contact while simultaneously managing expression through the display or withholding of that status; they often co-determine "permission to appear" with relational/values positioning and are routed through digital–linguistic modulation to segment audiences.

But politics is not the only structure that shapes identity. When the state felt too far, too risky, or simply not meaningful, participants turned elsewhere. They found space in religion, in family roles, in everyday values. The following section looks at how people build their sense of self through these quieter, often more personal ways of belonging.

5.4 Relational and Values-Driven Positionings

Not all identity decisions are about culture or politics. Broadly speaking, culture is also an institution like politics. Norms can also be very heavy. For many participants, especially those who felt distant from politics or cautious about speaking publicly, other structures stepped in— not official, but just as powerful. Religion. Family. Work. Values they held onto quietly, but which shaped how they moved through life in Britain.

These were not loud expressions. People did not say, "I belong here," or "This defines me." But they showed it in how they spoke to their children, in how they made career choices, and in how they turned to belief systems that felt safe and meaningful. In these spaces, identity was not something that had to be explained. It could just be lived. Here, identity is not formed through institutions of citizenship or law but is continually reshaped through ethical obligations, relational roles, and religious frameworks. Sometimes these choices offered protection—ways to stay visible without being political. Sometimes they helped participants reframe themselves in terms that made more sense than "British" or "Chinese." Sometimes they were quiet forms of resistance. This section explores four of these patterns. None of them is fixed. Each is a way of making space—when national identity feels too narrow, and political identity feels too risky.

5.4.1 Religious Shelter and Moral Reframing

For a small group of participants, religion was not just about belief. It was a space—quiet, stable, and separate from politics—where identity could be expressed without fear. These were not all devout believers. Some had only recently joined churches or faith-based groups in the UK. Others described their faith in more cultural terms—what they called "a value system" or "a moral way to live." But what they shared was a sense that religion provided a way for them to be visible, to contribute, and to connect, without being drawn into difficult questions about national identity or political loyalty.

Participant P33(Female, casual worker) said: "I don't really care about politics. Politics is always about power. When I get closer to God, I feel relaxed. I feel human." She had lived in the UK for over 20 years, and had chosen not to apply for citizenship. "I have a Chinese passport," she told me, "but my values now are more Christian than anything else." For her, faith was not just personal—it was a way of reframing who she was.

Others described how religious spaces allowed them to participate without suspicion. P24 (Male, PhD) said he started volunteering through his local church, even though he did not identify as Christian at first. "They welcomed me. I think religion in the UK is not so strict. It's more about helping, caring, and showing up. It's not like politics that you don't have to take sides." His words suggest something important: religion was not about doctrine. It was about belonging safely.

For some, these spaces also offered protection, not just emotionally, but socially. Participant 24 also noted that being part of a religious group made it easier to explain his background without having to answer hard questions. "People see me as kind," he said. "They think religious people are peaceful. It helps me."

This kind of moral sheltering did more than just soften their social image. It allowed participants to recode their identity: not as "Chinese" or "British," but as someone with spiritual values—care, humility, kindness. These qualities travelled more easily across borders. And unlike politics, they were not policed. What emerged here was a form of identity grounded not in ethnicity or nationality, but in moral syntax. A way to be seen without being judged. A way to participate without being questioned. And for many, that was enough.

5.4.2 Gendered and Familial Calibration

For many participants, identity was not something that they could define alone. It was shaped by their gender or familial roles—as parents, daughters, sons, or partners. This roles come with anticipations and expectations from both within the family and outside society. The family created a frame that influences one's whole identity. Some described how they adjusted their behaviour for the sake of their children. Others talked about how being seen as a "Chinese mother" or a "quiet wife" affected how they were read by others. Gender and family did not dictate who they were—but they often determined how they were allowed to be seen.

Participant P27 (Female, Lecturer) told me: "I always lead my children to some community events. Before having children, I tended to go to LGBTQ pride parades, or I even came to the Chinese embassy to memorialise those who died during the COVID lockdown. But after having my child, I don't talk about politics. I need to ensure my child is safe, learns the language, and fits in. That's more important." When I asked her about her own views, she said, "I have opinions. But I keep them for myself. I don't want to bring trouble." For her, silence was not suppression, but careful parenting. This kind of adjustment wasn't limited to mothers. Some fathers, too, found that parenthood changed how they navigated public roles and social responsibility.

Another participant, P26 (Male, Councillor), described how being a father made him more cautious about all behaviours. "I try to be a role model for my daughter. So, I'm trying my best to contribute to this society to prove that I can become a role model." In his case, the shift was

not about fear. It was about setting an example. Being a parent changed how he handled visibility.

Still, for others, gender was not a constraint to manage, but a cause to act on. Especially among women, being seen as unequal became a reason to participate more, not less. Participant P7 (Female, Lecturer) said: "I always know as a female I am in an unfair position. So, every time there is something that I can protest as a female, I will participate in it. And more importantly, you know in China to be a feminist has a very high standard. Firstly, the government do not like feminists, so there are few true feminists in China. More importantly, in China, some feminist communities claim that people should read all classical theories and books about feminism to become a feminist. However, in the UK, they embrace diverse opinions. I can become a feminist if I want."

However, gendered identity can also be shown as non-aggressive. For some women, being seen as gentle or apolitical was a way to move through work and public life more safely. One woman (P37, Female, Start-up Business owner) said that in her UK workplace, she was seen as "soft" and "non-political," which made things easier. "They expect me to be quiet," she said. "And I let them think that. It's safer." But she added, "At home, I'm in charge. I just don't show that outside."

These participants were not simply conforming. They were calibrating, aligning their self-presentation with what was expected and what they needed to protect. Gender and family roles didn't define them, but offered a set of coordinates: where to speak, when to stay quiet, how to appear in ways that felt safe. In these spaces, identity was not declared. It was adjusted. Politics was muted not out of absence, but out of care and love. And visibility was shaped not by ideology, but by responsibility. Through the language of parenting, of femininity, of social roles, these participants made room for themselves—not loudly, but deliberately.

5.4.3 Professional and Sectoral Substitution

For some participants, identity found its anchor not in nationality or politics, but in their work. Their profession gave them both a voice and a boundary. They not only speak as citizens or migrants. They spoke as professionals. Professional roles can be an add-on which gives them more courage and incentives to perform with solid knowledge.

This was particularly evident among participants with academic or intellectual backgrounds. P7 (Female, Lecturer) told me, "In the UCU Strike. I stood on the frontline as a Chinese woman intellectual. To be honest, without the identity as an intellectual, I may not choose to be visible. I am a social scientist. If a social scientist gives up their own right to speak for themselves, who can speak for us?" For her, the university was not merely a workplace; it was a position. It allowed her to speak without having to justify her national identity.

P32 (Female, Charity staff) made a similar point: "I am a well-educated person who holds a master's degree from a prestigious university and works for society. That's how I define myself. I have to voice the social justice. I really wanted to do something. You know, doing something is not easy. Many of my friends around me asked me to shut up. Struggle to still say something or not to say, but to do something as a people with a good educational background is nesserary."

For both, intellectual work provided a more stable and legitimate identity structure than politics. It gave them moral ground without requiring national loyalty. But this strategy wasn't confined to academia. P39 (Male, Chef) spoke passionately about his role in a small family-run restaurant. "I'm not a cook—I'm a chef," he said. "I've trained for this. I'm serious. I used to work in Peking restaurant, which is the best restaurant in China. When I see people ruin Chinese food for money in the UK, I get angry. Because we represent something. I have to do it properly." For him, professionalism was not just about pride. It was a means to safeguard his dignity.

Similarly, P28 (Female, Chinese teacher) described how teaching language became a form of cultural care. "I know people say we are brainwashed or that we bring propaganda. But we have to do something in a soft way. Culture is not politics. As a Chinese teacher, I have to spread the kindness of the Chinese culture to my neighbourhood and community." In her case, professional identity helped separate what she did from larger political narratives. She wasn't speaking for the Chinese state. She was speaking about the value of cultural exchange and learning.

What connects these participants is not the type of work they do, but how they transform their work into an ethical stance. They do not speak as migrants or as citizens. They speak as scholars, as chefs, as teachers. Their professions allow them to appear without being politicised, to take up space without having to justify their presence through national terms.

Knowledge is power, but it is also responsibility (Foucault, M，1980). In these accounts, identity does not require allegiance to a state. It was crafted through care and expertise. And in that space, they found a form of legitimacy the nation could not provide.

5.4.4 Ideological–Critical Identities

For a few participants, identity came less from where they lived or what nationality they held, and more from what they believed in. These were people who did not think of values as intangible or something added later, but as something already woven into their way of life. They acted from a place of belief, not allegiance, in the UK.

P9 (Male, International Students) described himself as someone "raised on ideals." He talked a lot about justice. "My ideas come from Marxism, not that with Chinese characteristics" he said, "but also from traditional Chinese thinking, like the idea of the *shi da fu (Confucian Intellectuals)*. You know, the people who dared to speak the truth." When I asked what that meant in daily life, he said, "Everything I do has to make sense with what I believe. I don't need Britain or China to tell me who I am. I already know through reading and thinking." For him, identity was not about fitting into any system. It was about keeping a certain kind of inner consistency. His beliefs were the reference point, not the passport, not the slogan.

Another participant, P31 (Female, Business owner), described herself first and foremost as an environmentalist. "I don't care much about which country I'm in. I care about the planet. I have to admit that the UK give me more room for this. But the environment means more than the UK to me. That's the only frame that really makes sense to me." She explained how she tried to live out that position every day. What she ate, how she travelled, the way she taught her child.

Neither of them spoke in big slogans. But they had something solid. Their values helped them decide what to say yes to and what to avoid. It was not about ideology in a formal sense. It was more like a compass. Identity was not something they explained. It was something they aligned with. It did not come from being Chinese or British, but from following through on a set of values that made sense. And in doing so, they built something many others struggled to find: a self that did not need permission to exist.

5.4.5 Marginalised and Intersectional Identities: An In-Between

Not everyone had a strong anchor—religion, profession, politics, or even family. For some participants, identity was not something they could fully build or fully escape. They lived between frames—seen, but not really included. They recognise that they are not only constrained by a set of norms, a single classification system or a single moral system. They moved through workplaces, public events, and everyday life, but always with a sense that they were only half-recognised or read in an incomplete way.

P1 (Female, Administrative staff) described herself as "an intersectional feminist from the Global South." She was clear about where she stood. "I don't hang out with white feminists," she said. "They always dominate the mainstream voice. They talk about gender like it's the only axis, and ignore race, language, and class. I once tried to say something about language politics, and a white girl corrected my grammar." For her, feminism was not a shared cause. It was another field of exclusion. "I feel closer to women from Africa or Latin America. They know. It's not just about patriarchy—it's about colonialism and racism. And sometimes the people who silence us most are other white women."

Her frustration was not abstract. It came from rooms she had been in. She kept showing up, even while knowing she would not be fully heard. As Crenshaw (1991) reminds us, intersectionality isn't just about holding multiple identities—it's about what happens when structures fail to recognise those intersections, and people fall through the cracks.

P2 (Male, International student) used a very different language. "To be honest," he said, "I feel like a bystander here." By showing me a photo of Richmond Park in London, he said, "When I come to the park, I feel that animals are free, but are they really free? I keep asking myself Who am I? I still feel that I am a bystander who is just going to observe everything, that cannot participate due to my accent, due to my behaviours, due to my appearance." I asked him if he wanted to get involved. He shook his head. "Even if I tried, I think I wouldn't understand it the way locals do. I don't feel invited."

He was not angry. He was not excluded by policy or people, but by the structure of everyday recognition. There was no one moment that pushed him out. Just a long, steady accumulation of signals that this was not really his field.

P17 (Female, Behavioural Scientist) told me about a recent trip she took to Hastings. She showed me a photo during the interview—just her, standing on the beach at Hastings. "You know the history here, right? 1066 and all of that. I didn't know at the time. I just went for a walk. But after I posted it, a few British colleagues said, 'Oh wow, that's such an important place!' I didn't feel it. I still don't. I've been here eight years. I speak the language. I pay rent. But I still feel like a tourist."

Their everyday lives were marked by a quieter kind of disconnection—one that comes not from being pushed out, but from never fully being brought in. They understood the language, knew the rituals, recognised the norms—but that knowledge did not always translate into a sense of belonging.

Their identities seemed to live in a constant state of translation—never completely invisible, but never fully anchored either. In this in-between space—where one is always watching, always sensing, always negotiating—belonging became less of a feeling and more of a practice. This kind of in-between positioning echoes what Bhabha (1994) calls the *third space*: a space of negotiation, partial visibility, and identity that is always being re-translated rather than resolved.

5.4.6 Summary-Everyday Positions: When Identity Is Lived, Not Declared

Most people in this section did not try to explain who they were. They did not talk about identity in fixed terms. Instead, they talked about the choices they make in their lives, and what they avoid. What they hold on to, and when. Some turned to faith. Some shaped their actions around being a parent or a teacher. Some trusted their profession to speak for them. Others followed values that felt bigger than nationality or culture. These things were not always loud. But they gave people a way to move through the world.

This thesis does not aim to enumerate all the types of identities that exist. That would be endless. Most people do not just have one identity. They carry many. And each part shifts, depending on the space, the time, the people around them. What matters here is not how many types there are, but how these identities are made. The ways people position themselves, the small strategies they use to stay safe, to stay real, or to stay connected. For those who had no strong anchor—or who carried too many things at once—life felt more uncertain. They were always reading the room. Always adjusting. Sometimes they said very little, just to stay safe.

Sometimes they tried but did not feel heard. It wasn't that they were rejected. Just never fully included.

Analytically, relational and values-driven positionings operate across both expression and integration axes, as moral frameworks, family obligations, and social roles simultaneously set boundaries on what can be expressed and provide alternative, non-state forms of belonging. They often interact with cultural anchoring and digital modulation, using them to frame or filter how relational and value-based identities are enacted in different arenas.

In the next part, we turn to something else: language, platforms, and what it means to speak at all. Because in the digital space, saying one thing or saying nothing can both carry weight.

5.5 Digital and Linguistic Modulation

For many people I spoke with, speaking was not just about having something to say. It was about deciding whether to say it, how to say it, and who should hear it. Language did not always feel free. Platforms did not always feel neutral. What looked like a simple comment or a harmless post often carried more weight than it seemed.

Digital space made this harder. Not because people did not know what they wanted to say—but because they could not be sure how far it would go, how it might be read, or who might be watching. Even the private chat is between two. Their private messages can also be interpreted and recorded by a third party or even the government.

Some talked about switching languages depending on who was in the room. Others said they acted like different people on different apps. A few told me they stopped posting altogether, not because they had nothing to share, but because they were unsure how their words would be interpreted. Even in this research, I have my own agency to interpret their words with cations and responsibilities. They were not silent. They were adjusting. They were paying attention. And over time, that adjustment became part of who they were. Not just what they said, but what they did not. Not just how they showed up, but where—and under what name.

This section is about those adjustments. Not the content, but the act of expression itself. When the platform has a mood, when the language has risk, when the silence has meaning—how do people move?

5.5.1 Switching Languages, Switching Selves

Some people I spoke with did not just move between platforms. They moved between voices or narrtives. The words they chose weren't just about clarity. They were about control. Language is a tool for them to regulate and manage their identities.

P5 (Female, Administrative staff) told me she was a huge Sherlock Holmes fan. That was the first thing she mentioned when we met. Later, she showed me screenshots of posts she had made in WeChat. They were in English. Some long, some cryptic. "You know," she said, "if I write like this in Chinese, people will take it personally. But in English, they just think I'm being literary." In one post, she quoted a line from Doyle's story. Underneath, she added: "We all know what this really means." It wasn't clear who "we" was. But she knew.

When I asked her why she switched languages like that, she smiled: "I don't trust people to read me fairly. So, I design how I'm read." She said when she really needed to vent—about something happening in the UK—she would write in Chinese, but only on Instagram or Facebook. "They won't get it," she said. "And that's exactly the point." Her identity wasn't fixed. It wasn't national. It was layered, specific. "If you ask me who I am," she said, "I'm a Sherlock fan. That's the only label I accept." Her strategy wasn't about hiding. It was about owning the language filter. The point wasn't to be understood by everyone, but to speak only to those who could follow.

P24 (Male, PhD) had a different approach to achieve the same function. When he was upset about something—politics, policies, anything that touched a nerve—he would post old stories. Snippets from the Bible. Lines from Chinese history. Sometimes just a phrase. "People who know will get it," he said. "I don't need to explain." His feed was full of quiet references.

He spoke openly about his Christian faith, especially with the Church of England. But he also said, "I still think like a Confucian sometimes. It's hard to explain. I just believe in speaking with measure." His identity did not come from one source. He uses languages as a way to express without exposing.

For both of them, language was not just for saying things. It was for choosing who gets to understand. Switching was more than translation; it was about navigation—through audiences, risks, and parts of themselves. Language helps them avoid being misinterpreted—or sometimes,

being understood too directly. In these digital spaces, language was not just a tool for meaning. It became a way to adjust visibility, protect position, and decide which version of the identities can be shown.

5.5.2 Platform Feeling: Where You Speak Shapes What You Say

People did not just think about what to say. They thought about where to say it. Some platforms felt safer. Some did not. Some encouraged longer posts and careful wording. Others felt more open, more casual. But no one I talked to used all the platforms the same way.

Participant P20 (Female, Marketing Professional) told me: "As an immigrant, I do not want people to think that I'm not living well." She then showed me a picture she took in London, and this is the background of her Red Note account: "On Red Note, I must become a London elite woman. This is the stereotype, and I also like this stereotype. You contacted me on Red Note to invite me to this interview because of the content, right? I try to become a very fancy woman. I'm very successful, right?"

Participant P4 (Male, Engineer) directly noted: "I fully understand the differences of platforms. So, on WeChat, I don't post anything. Maybe from the CCP's perspective, I am a loyal Chinese citizen. But on WhatsApp, I discuss politics with my friends all around the world a lot; we criticise the government and policies towards COVID. I trust you. You won't give my information to the Chinese government, right?"

What these participants described was not just awareness. It was choreography. They did not treat platforms as mirrors, but as stages—each with its own rules, tones, and invisible risks. P20 did not believe she was that elite woman. But she learned that showing that version of herself opened doors. P4 was not confused about his political stance. But he chose carefully where to speak and where to remain quiet.

In both cases, identity was not fractured. It was modulated. Shaped by audience, filtered by context, and built across platforms that were never really neutral. The question was never just "who are you?"—it was also "where are you performing that version, and for whom?" What they were all describing was this: platforms shape behaviour. People did not just bring their identity to a space. They adapted it—to the tone, to the audience, to the imagined risk.

They knew posts can be forwarded. That a message meant for one person could reach many. That the line between private and public was thin. As Marwick and Boyd (2014) point out, the context of digital speech collapses easily, bringing together audiences that were never meant to meet. But it is not just about surveillance. It is also about how tech platforms make people feel. Some platforms reward performance. Some punish the wrong tone. Some are unpredictable. As Zuboff (2019) warns, surveillance capitalism does not just watch people—it changes how they act. People adjust. They code-switch. They disappear. They post memes instead of thoughts. They screenshot instead of replying. They do not say what they think. Or they say it somewhere else. Platform, in that sense, becomes part of identity too—not just where you speak, but how you manage being heard.

5.5.3 Summary- Expression Has to Be Managed

In this section, what came through was that speaking is not simple. People do not just decide what to say. They think about where to say it, what language to use, and who might be listening. Some switch between English and Chinese to control the tone. Some post one thing on one app, and something very different on another. Some stay quiet, not because they have nothing to say, but because they know it is easier that way.

Language becomes more than a tool—it becomes a filter. Platform becomes more than a space—it becomes a frame. Together, they shape how people move. How much do they show? What part of themselves do they let out? In a way, language and digital platforms offer something: a chance to adjust, to redirect, to plan what version of the self appears. But they also draw lines. Not everything can be said everywhere. Not every version of the self fits every space. And that is the balance many people have learned to manage—not just how to speak, but how to carry their identity across platforms, languages, and risks. Not what they believe, but how they live quietly, carefully, and partially.

On the two-axis map, digital and linguistic modulation acts on both axes: it micro-tunes expression (voice, code-switching, platform choice) and simultaneously shapes perceived integration by signalling competence, alignment or distance to institutions and publics; functionally it is the routing layer that sequences and scales cultural anchoring, civic/national positionalities, and relational/values strategies across audiences and risks.

5.6 Strategic Modulation: Configuring Identity under Constraint

Looking back, it is hard to draw a line around what identity really means. Most people I talked to did not use big words. They did not say "I'm this" or "I'm that." Instead, they revealed their identity in what they did—how they spoke, when they stayed quiet, where they showed up, and when they chose not to. Some people leaned on religion. Some on work. Some stayed close to family roles. Some found small ways to speak through platforms or silence. None of these were fixed. People switched, changed tone, held back, or stepped in—depending on where they were, who was there, what felt possible.

So, this chapter is not about naming types. It is more about listening. Watching how people move through different spaces, how they protect themselves, and how they make space where there was not much to begin with. Sometimes they do it with words. Sometimes with silence. Sometimes with humour. Most of the time, it is just small choices—barely visible, but deeply careful. Nobody used just one method. Most people used several. Not at once, but across time. They tried things, held things together, let things go. That is not confusion. That is life under pressure. That is learning to be many things, but not all at once, and not everywhere.

This section tries to map the whole fragmented identity pieces into a clear picture. And that is where the next chapter begins—not with identity as a thing to describe, but with what happens when people start to act. Not everything can be said. Not everything can be shown. But something always finds a way through. Sometimes small. Sometimes messy. Sometimes enough.

5.6.1 Identity as Practice, Not Category

By this point, it is hard to treat identity as a stable thing. Most people I spoke with did not explain themselves through fixed categories. They did not say "I'm this kind of person" or "I belong to that group." Instead, they talked about what they do—when they show up, when they step back, when they stay quiet, when they say just enough. They did not choose one strategy and stick with it. They moved across many. They used faith when it helped. Or a professional role. Or silence. Or platforms. Or just humour. And they made those decisions not once, but over and over again—because no space stayed the same, and no audience could be read in just one way.

As discussed in Chapter 3, this thesis does not treat identity as a background. It understands it as something lived, shifted, and performed—a way of adjusting to risk, recognition, and room to breathe (3.2.1; 3.2.3). The strategies shown in this chapter are not about types of people. They are ways of managing pressure—ways of staying visible without being exposed, or staying connected without losing too much (3.2.4).

Some of these moves are quiet. Some are deliberate. But they all belong to the same structure: a world where expression carries risk, and where integration is never neutral (3.4.2). And that means identity is not what people say they are. It is what they do to stay intact. It is not just who they feel like—it's how they carry themselves through systems that don't always see them clearly. This section does not offer a model to categorise people. It offers a way to read the adjustments—small, strategic, sometimes improvised—that let people keep going. Identity, here, is not a label. It is a way of moving under pressure.

5.6.2 Modular Strategies and Their Combinations

People didn't use just one strategy. Most didn't even think of their actions as "strategies" at all. But in how they moved between languages, roles, platforms, and silences. They were drawing from different places. Not at random, and not according to fixed types, but in response to how things felt in the moment: what could be said, what had to be avoided, and what could be done without losing too much.

This chapter has shown four broad kinds of positioning: cultural grounding, institutional or civic affiliation, relational or value-based identity, and language/platform modulation. These domains may seem separate, but in lived practice, they rarely stay apart. People draw from across them all the time. They don't switch from one to another—they combine them. Cultural signs may be wrapped in religious language; both political fears and aesthetic goals shape platform choices; family roles are inflected by civic visibility. And this combination is not chaotic. It has structure. It is just not the kind of structure you can map as identity types. What we see instead is modular positioning—people moving across recognisable strategies, but in ways that are overlapping and often temporary. Strategies are combined, not because people have stable identities to express, but because they face complex constraints that call for adjustable configurations.

These combinations form when constraint meets intention. People sense the limits of what they can say, what others expect, and what might be risky. But they do not freeze. They move inside those limits—sometimes carefully, sometimes playfully, sometimes just to get by. This is the space where agency does not erase structure—it works through it.

Taking P1(Female, Administrative staff) as an example. She calls herself "an intersectional feminist from the Global South." But what that means in her daily life is not stable. Sometimes she avoids white-dominated feminist events. Sometimes she joins other white-dominant society, but only silently. Sometimes she posts in her own private community. Sometimes she shares academic theory with connotations publicly. None of this is contradiction. It is a responsive combination of political consciousness, racial reading, linguistic calculation, and platform strategy. She does not abandon one logic for another. She carries them together, selectively, tactically.

P5 (Female, Administrative staff) uses her love of Sherlock Holmes not just for personal joy, but as a rhetorical device. On WeChat, she quotes fiction in English to express her critique safely. On Western platforms, she uses Chinese to speak more directly, knowing the audiences will not overlap. She is not hiding who she is. She is shaping who sees what. And she does so by combining literary metaphor, platform targeting, and tone control—a kind of modular identity scripting.

P24 (Male, PhD) rarely speaks directly, but everything he posts carries intention. He weaves biblical verses with Confucian moralism, composing a kind of ethical language that allows him to express unease without confrontation. He combines religious position, cultural literacy, and digital ambiguity not to obscure himself, but to place himself carefully. His identity is not static. It is strategic—made legible through code, not confession.

These examples do not just show different styles. They reveal a logic of composition. That logic does not follow a model of identity types. It follows a model of modular responses— where what gets combined depends on the moment, the audience, the stakes, and the possible consequences. Over time, these combinations become habits. People learn what fits together, what risks too much, and what buys time. This is what it means to talk about identity as modulation. It is not that people have a fixed self and then perform it. It is that who they can be is shaped by what they are allowed to show, and what they learn to manage. Sometimes that

means layering strategies. Sometimes it means hiding one under another. But in all cases, identity is not one logic—it is a composite field, composed again and again under pressure.

5.6.3 Mapping the Identity Field: Expression × Integration

When I started writing this chapter, I could have followed the four identity themes developed during analysis—Cultural Identities, National and Civic Identities, Social Identities, and Intersectional and Values-Driven Identities. Each came with its own codes, categories, and internal logics. But it did not feel right to structure the chapter that way. What I saw in the interviews was not a set of types. It was a movement—people drawing from different sources, switching strategies, reshaping themselves moment to moment.

That is why I did not write this chapter as a theme-by-theme explanation. Instead, I wrote it around strategic practices: cultural anchoring, civic positioning, relational or value-based framing, and digital or linguistic modulation. These were not ideal types of people. They were ways of responding to structure, to risk, to expectation. The four identity themes are not seen as containers, but more like materials. Culture, status, role, belief—these are the things people pull from, mix, avoid, or layer. The strategies in this chapter demonstrate how these materials are utilised, not always clearly or consciously, but always with structural pressure in mind.

This shift, from theme to strategy, is also part of what Reflexive Thematic Analysis asks us to do. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, themes are not just summaries of data, they are tools for building meaning. What matters is not just what participants said, but how their experiences help us think about structure, strategy, and movement. That is the work of this chapter. This is where the framework from Chapter 3 comes in. I introduced Expression × Integration not as a typology, but as a way to read space, a way to understand how people position themselves between being seen and being accepted. Expression is not just what you say. It is how visible you are. Integration is not just status, but rather how close you are expected to move toward the norm.

Each strategy in this chapter interacts with those pressures differently. Cultural anchoring often mainly sits along the expression axis: food, language, symbols that say "I'm here." At the same time, it intersects with the integration axis, for example, in language acquisition or institutionalised cultural recognition. Such expressions are often coded, selective, or protective, rather than simply declarative. Civic positioning centres around integration: citizenship,

residency, civic visibility—but it is often conditional or tactical. But it also involves forms of expression, such as public performances of belonging or silence. Relational and value-based strategies stretch across both axes. Family roles, moral beliefs, or gendered behaviours shape what can be shown and how much can be absorbed. Linguistic and digital modulation is the infrastructure of movement. It is how people switch tone, manage risk, and shape how they are read across platforms, audiences, and contexts.

This framework, undoubtedly, cannot explain everything in detail. But it helps to hold things still for a moment, to see where the weight is, and how people are balancing it. It helps to hold things still for a moment, to see where the weight is, and how people are balancing it. Not everyone stays in one place. Most move across the field. They reach out, pull back, shift expression up or down, and integrate closer or further, depending on what is at stake. This movement is often not linear. It is layered. People use one strategy to shield another or adopt a visible posture in one space while withdrawing from another. These are not inconsistencies— they are coordinated responses to uneven systems.

Take P24 (Male, PhD) for example. On platforms like WeChat, he rarely expressed direct political views. But he frequently posted fragments of biblical scripture, historical allegories, and Confucian moral sayings. He never claimed a stance, yet his meaning was felt by people who could know or people he chose. On the expression axis, he asserted presence through values. On the integration axis, he maintained distance, resisting complete civic or political legibility. His digital silence did not contradict his cultural signalling—it structured it.

P1(Female, Administrative staff) offers a different kind of cross-positioning. She rejected formal political participation in the UK, critiquing whiteness in mainstream feminism and positioning herself as ideologically unaligned. But she was also deeply active in informal spheres: volunteering, building networks, posting sharp social critique through memes and translated theory. Her strategy lowered integration, but amplified expression. She didn't disappear from public life, she redesigned her place within it and has clear and unique identity combination.

What appears as a contradiction becomes, through this lens, a diagonal movement across the identity field. The model does not classify the self, it tracks how people split, shift, and reassemble themselves to remain whole in fractured spaces. It shows how visibility can be withheld in one direction while amplified in another. And that is what this map is for—not to

simplify, but to recognise how people make space for identity when identity alone is not enough. And that is what this chapter has been about, not a classification of identities, but a mapping of strategies. A way to see how identity is managed across structure, not against it. How people do not just speak but position themselves.

In the next chapter, I follow that movement a little further. Because if identity lives inside this tension—between visibility and acceptance, then political participation is where that tension starts to show. The strategies described here do not just shape how people appear. They shape what becomes possible when they act.

Chapter 6. Complexity Leads to Diversity: Identity and Political Participation Among First-Generation Chinese Migrants

6.1 Introduction: From Linear Participation to Co-Constitutional Dynamics

This chapter explores how identity and political participation shape one another. It starts with a simple observation: political action does not always follow a straight path. For many first-generation mainland Chinese migrants, political participation is not the ultimate goal of identity formation. Moreover, it is difficult to assert that identity plays a background role in explaining political behaviour. Identities change constantly, while political behaviours may change periodically, but sometimes do not. This reveals a complex interplay.

In most mainstream political science models, political participation is seen as a linear process. Migrants arrive, adapt to their new society, and gradually become more politically active. This reflects the behaviourist logic found in the civic voluntarism model, where participation is a function of resources, motivation, and recruitment (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Similarly, classical theories of political socialisation assume that over time, democratic institutions will shape civic identity and produce more engaged citizens (Almond and Verba, 1963). In this view, participation follows identity, and identity grows through exposure to democratic norms.

But for many of the migrants in this study, this is not how participation works. Some speak or act before they feel a sense of belonging. Others stay silent, even after many years in the UK. For some, taking part in a local campaign leads to greater political trust. In contrast, for others, it results in frustration or withdrawal due to differences. What these examples show is that participation and identity are not always in a simple cause-and-effect relationship. One does not always come first. Often, they move together, shaping and reshaping each other. This chapter cannot recount a causal mechanism, but a way of understanding and interpreting.

To explain this, the chapter shifts from a linear model of political participation to a co-constitutional perspective. The term "co-constitutional" is used here to suggest that

participation and identity are mutually formative. Participation does not merely express a pre-existing identity; it can also disrupt, reinforce, or redirect it. Likewise, identity is not only a source of action, but also something that is performed, recognised, and revised through political practice (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Butler, 1990; Yuval-Davis, 2011). From the interpretive perspective, this thesis does not claim that there is a causal relationship between identity and political participation. People may participate in politics for other reasons, but they bring their identities together. This chapter focuses on one identity that arrives in the field and how it interacts with political participation. In this framework, identity and participation do not follow a fixed order—they develop through ongoing interaction and response.

This chapter builds on the analytical structure introduced in Chapter 3, especially the two axes of identity construction: expression (how visible or silent one's identity is) and integration (how connected or marginal one is in the host political environment). These axes help capture not only who participates and why, but also under what conditions, for what purpose, and with what consequences. As I have emphasised in Chapter 3, this is a topology instead of a typology. This means that it is not used to categorise migrants into a few fixed types, but rather as an analytical space that can display multiple combinations of identity and participation, thereby better explaining mobility, conditionality and contextuality. From this perspective, two models are developed to explain different patterns of identity–participation interaction. The first, the Networked Political Model, shows how participation acts as a form of feedback within an existing identity structure. Individuals adjust their behaviour across different identity "nodes"—such as professional role, ethnic affiliation, or moral belief—without fundamentally changing who they are. The second, the Dialectical–Emergence Model, focuses on the situations when participation changes identity. In this case, action leads to conflict or disruption, which opens space for transformation.

These models are not rigid categories. I must emphasise again that this is not a typology, and I will not attempt to categorise migrants into different categories. Instead, I propose two models to explain how they will participate in politics based on their identities. Many participants move between them, depending on time, context, or experience. The purpose is not to classify, but to understand the mechanisms—how participation becomes a tool for adjustment in some cases, and a trigger for redefinition in others.

The models follow two different dynamics. The Networked Political Model is a loop model that shows how behaviour feeds back into identity over time. The Dialectical–Emergence

Model is a spiral model that shows how behaviour breaks patterns and moves identity into a new space. Both are grounded in empirical cases and reflect different ways that migrants respond to different cues.

The rest of this chapter develops as follows: Section 6.2 introduces the Networked Political Model. Section 6.3 presents the Dialectical–Emergence Model. Section 6.4 compares them and shows how different context—such as authoritarian memory, democratic visibility, and digital platform governance—shapes each path. Section 6.5 offers a conclusion and asks what participation really means when identity is still in motion.

6.2 The Networked Political Model: Loop-Based Adjustments through Identity Feedback

This section introduces the Networked Political Model, which explains how political participation operates within an individual's existing identity structure. This model treats political participation as a mechanism of adjustment. Through political participation, a first-generation mainland Chinese migrant revaluates his identity, and that's just it, in response to political or social cues. The model builds on the Social Identity Complexity theory (Roccas and Brewer, 2002) that identity is not singular or fixed, but made up of multiple dimensions. These identity components—what we may call "nodes"—can be activated or suppressed depending on the situation. Participation does not create a new identity from scratch. It moves between these nodes or slightly develops these nodes, adjusting the way a person expresses or prioritises parts of who they already are.

This logic follows a loop structure. Action leads to feedback. Feedback leads to small internal shifts. Over time, this feedback loop helps maintain balance across competing identity demands without requiring deep transformation. The model draws from Social Identity Complexity Theory (Roccas and Brewer, 2002), and helps explain why many migrants participate selectively, cautiously, and contextually—without abandoning old attachments or forming entirely new ones.

6.2.1 Theoretical Premise: Identity as Node-Based Regulatory System

For many first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants, identity is not a stable background. In this section, I describe this identity structure as a network, not in a technical sense, but in a

lived one: the self is distributed across dimensions, including gender, family roles, professional roles, and others. Participation is one of the ways people hold that network together. This model builds on a simple insight developed in Chapter 3: identity is not a possession, but a regulated space. It is not always about who one is, but about what is allowed to be expressed, and when. Sometimes, people act politically to assert their positions. Sometimes they act to suppress something else. Silence, for example, is not always the opposite of voice, but it is also a functional aspect.

What I observed in the data materials was not always drastic transformation, but a resilience to adapt. People have different dimensions, but these dimensions are not always in harmony. Political participation gave them a way to balance and make one part of their identity more visible, while adjusting it to fit the reality and contexts. This is what I call a node-based identity structure. Each identity node—a professional role, a moral conviction, a cultural memory, a civic responsibility—can be brought forward or held back. These nodes are not equal and not equally safe. Some are rewarded by the host society. Others are risky.

The Networked Political Model understands participation as a way of moving between these nodes. It is not a linear journey from silence to engagement. It is a series of small, reversible, strategic moves. It follows a loop, not a path. Identity (A) engages with context (B), and then returns to itself (A'), slightly reweighted, slightly more protected, slightly more legible.

What this model offers is not a vision of identity as something that moves forward, stage by stage, but as something that shifts sideways, node by node. Each participant carries not one identity, but several—arranged not hierarchically, but horizontally. These identity nodes— cultural, professional, civic, moral, political—do not develop in sequence, nor do they rely on each other to function. They coexist. And they are always there, even when quiet.

When a person enters a moment of political action, that moment (B) does not transform the whole self. It interacts with one or more of these identity nodes (A_1–A_2–A_3–A_4....A_n), leaving them slightly reconfigured. One node might become more articulate, like a civic position that gains confidence, while another might become more cautious, like a moral view that suddenly feels exposed. The rest may remain untouched. Sometimes the shift is small and isolated: A_1 becomes A_1', while A_2, A_3, and A_4 stay unchanged. At other times, several nodes shift together, like a ripple: A_1', A_3'. However, they do not fuse into a new self. The key aspect of the loop structure is that the refined node is merely an adjustment of the original 1, rather than a

completely new one. In this instance, political participation serves as the adjustment mechanism.

In this sense, identity is not a journey from silence to expression. It is a form of internal management. And participation is the point at which this management becomes visible. The loop mechanism is not A → B → C. It is $(A_1–A_2–A_3–A_4....A_n) → B → (A_1'–A_2–A_3'–A_4....A_n)$. The meaning lies not in what has changed overall, but in how the shape of the self has adjusted.
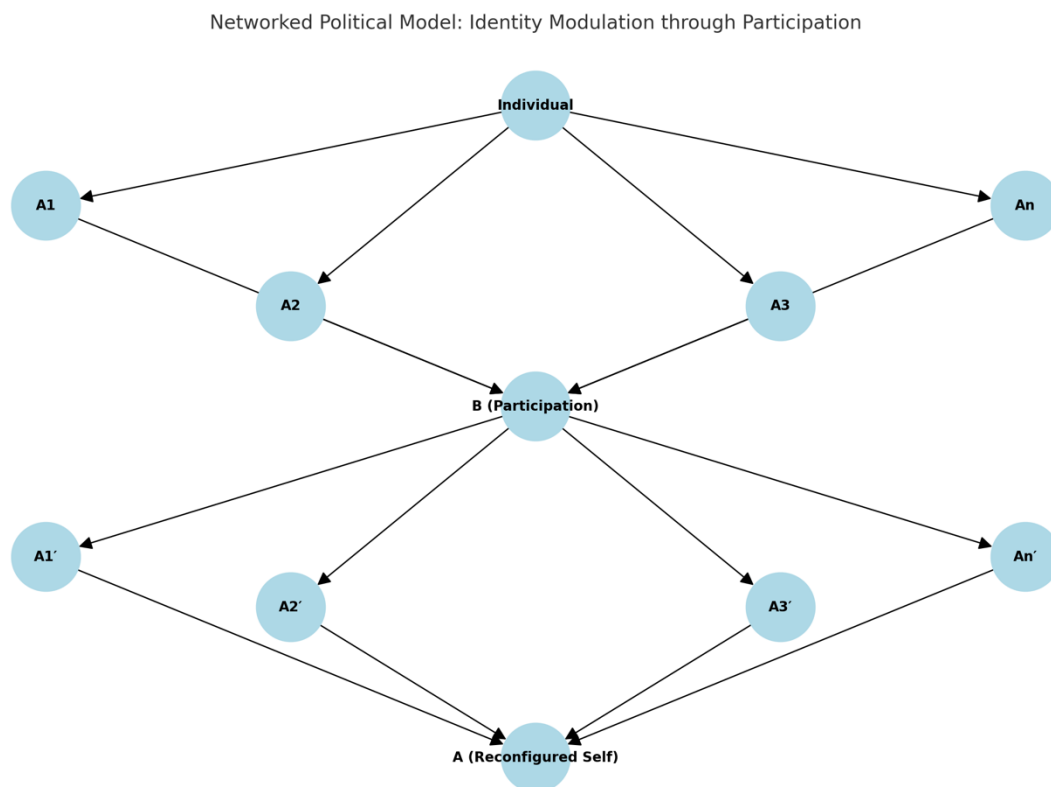
Figure 1 Structure of the Networked Political Model

That new configuration is not a finished product. It may last. It may fade. A node that once stepped forward may later recede. Each loop is a new start for the next round of adjustment. End adjustment of one node does not influence the existence of future adjustments or transformations of another node. This is what makes the model "networked": not because identity is digital, but because it is structurally distributed and constantly in motion—not toward integration, but toward coherence or just temporary coherence.

The model is grounded in the idea that identity is multi-layered and always situated and performed. As discussed earlier (see 3.2.2 and 3.4.1), following Social Identity Complexity Theory (Roccas and Brewer, 2002), Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990), people do not simply "express" who they are. This is also why I avoid the language of "integration." Most of the people I spoke with were not looking to dissolve their past. They were looking to hold multiple positions without collapsing. Some succeeded. Others struggled. But all were doing something far more complex than entering politics. They were modulating.

In the next section, I introduce three sub-models with empirical thick descriptions within this framework: one where participation leads to adjustment between systems, one where people maintain dual political identities, and one where previously inactive identities are suddenly stirred. Together, they show how migrants use political action not only to express who they are, but to manage the difficulty of being many things at once.

6.2.2 Sub-model one: Convergence–Divergence Model

Although the loop mechanism describes a general pattern of adjustment, not all participants move through it in the same way. Some use participation to test whether belonging is possible, drawing closer or pulling back depending on the response. Others maintain parallel systems of political engagement, shifting between contexts without fully merging them. And there are those for whom identity, long held in reserve, begins to shift only when something external— an election, a local incident, a feeling of threat—makes it necessary to respond.

These are not types of people. They are patterns of movement. The self does not follow a fixed route through the political field. It modulates—sometimes gently, sometimes sharply— depending on which part of the identity network is called into play. What follows are three such patterns, observed across the data, each of them showing a different logic of identity regulation through political participation. The aim is not to classify, but to stay close to the way people act: conditionally, partially, and with an awareness of risk.

The Convergence–Divergence Model is the primary sub-model of the loop-based Networked Political Model, covering the majority of cases that can be interpreted by this Model. In some cases, political participation does not challenge identity, but reaffirms it. The act of engaging— voting, canvassing, protesting—does not produce rupture. Instead, it moves within existing identity structures, reinforcing attachments or clarifying boundaries. This is the logic behind

what I term the Convergence–Divergence Model. It describes a pattern in which the participant enters into political space with a particular understanding of self, and exits with that understanding made sharper, either through a feeling of alignment or through an encounter with its limits. The structure remains intact.

Participant P13 (Female, Journalist) offered a vivid narrative of convergence: "After attending the UK citizenship (ceremony), I began to have a sense of responsibility to participate in public affairs. My engagement started with voting, but gradually expanded as a joint effort with the liberal Democrats. I joined the Labour Party first. However, I don't think that Labour treat me as a Chinese immigrant of value. Joining liberal Democrats I got more chances to be involved in local elections. To win the local election, I have to visit my neighbours one by one to introduce the policies and policy opinions from the Liberal Democrats. During the whole process, I feel that I love the UK more. It enables me to find my dignity in a democratic society which is I have never experienced in China. And I have a closer relationship with my neighbours. When I come to settled in this small town, I'm almost the only Chinese. My husband is also a British. But now I just say that we are all living here we are all neighbours we are residents in our town we have no differences. And I even can contribute more than other white people to the society."

What she described was not a process of becoming someone new, but of becoming more anchored. Every act of voting reinforced her identity as a British citizen. Every door she knocked on during her campaign deepened her sense of being a local resident. There was pride, but not novelty. What she experienced was a strengthening of two parallel nodes: the national identity tied to citizenship, and the civic identity tied to place. These nodes did not merge, nor did one replace the other. Each becomes more stable as political action brings them into motion. The result was not transformation, but reinforcement—identity that forms in a loop, not in a leap. While these identities moved in parallel, they were not drawn from different symbolic systems. Both her national and local affiliations were nested within the same democratic grammar of civic belonging. This is not hybridity—it is internal convergence within a single framework of recognition.

P7(Female, Lecturer), also a highly educated professional, moved through the same loop in a different direction. As a university lecturer, she participated in the UCU strikes, driven by a sense of professional ethics and by what she called "the moral duty of an Asian woman intellectual." But rather than generating a sense of political belonging, the experience

intensified her alienation. "During the strike, I found that my white colleagues kept their distance from us. I don't think that they can understand our problems and structural difficulties. Moreover, there are very few Asian colleagues who stood up to support me. I don't know, this might be an Asian culture. I feel more isolated and alone."

The strike exposed not solidarity, but distance. While marching, she felt her racialised and gendered identity become more pronounced—not only in relation to the institution she was resisting, but also among those protesting beside her. What changed in her was not her values, but the salience of her racial and gender node, which became sharper, more burdensome, and more structurally visible. Her identity did not shift categories. It shifted pressure. And like P13, she moved from A to A′—but in her case, the result was divergence, not convergence. The loop returned her to herself and strengthened her original identity, but not in a comforting way. Importantly, P7's experience was not one of strategic switching between different identity systems. Her action did not activate another political self but intensified the pressure on an already visible one. This marks her path not as hybrid, but as a loop of divergence within a single identity node, racialised, gendered, and unreconciled.

These two cases illustrate how loop-based adjustment can work across multiple nodes at once. For P13, national and local identities were strengthened simultaneously, showing a parallel convergence of civic confidence and spatial belonging. For P7, racial identity and moral-professional positioning were also jointly activated—but in ways that generated friction, not affirmation. Both moved through political action. Both came back to themselves. In neither case was the self replaced.

6.2.3 Sub-model Two: Hybrid Identity Model

The Hybrid Identity model is based on the previous Convergence–Divergence Model. However, what makes the Hybrid Identity Model different from the Convergence–Divergence model is not the number of identity nodes affected, but the structural separation of the contexts in which these nodes are activated. In Convergence–Divergence, political participation may adjust multiple aspects of identity, but those adjustments take place within a single symbolic framework—typically the liberal-democratic context of the UK. Even when outcomes differ, the loop operates inside one context of meaning, one structure of recognition.

P13 (Female, Journalist) offers a clear example. After acquiring British citizenship, she voted regularly, joined the Liberal Democrats, and eventually ran for town councillor. Her participation strengthened two identity positions: her sense of national belonging and her connection to the local community. But both shifts occurred within what this thesis terms the field of democratic legibility. Her identity became more anchored, but it remained entirely legible within the civic structure of the UK. There was no crossing of systems.

P7 (Female, Lecturer), by contrast, experienced divergence. As a university lecturer, she joined the UCU strike out of what she called a "moral duty as an Asian woman intellectual." But instead of affirmation, she encountered exclusion from white colleagues, from fellow protesters, and from the institution itself. Her identity looped back not as belonging, but as reinforced marginality. Yet still, the action, the feedback, and the identity modulation all occurred within the same institutional and cultural framework—the British university, shaped by liberal norms, racial hierarchies, and moral-political tensions. Her divergence was sharp, but it did not leave the structure.

However, in the Hybrid Identity Model, the participant P4 (Male, Engineer) does not move between identities—he moves across structures. His political participation loops through three distinct systems, each of which responds to the same identity position in radically different ways. That identity is not ethnic, national, or religious. It is epistemic. It is the identity of the critical intellectual: someone who speaks from professional expertise, demands evidence, and believes that the refusal to think critically is a form of moral failure. This identity remains consistent across his actions. What shifts is the context—and the structure of feedback it provides.

In Scotland, he participates as a resident with rights. He registers to vote, not to assert ideology, but to confirm legitimacy. "I am eligible to vote in local elections," he said. "I will definitely register. This is my right as a resident. I pay taxes. I feel that this brings me closer to the community." Here, his rational-critical identity is welcomed into the civic system. The act of voting strengthens his sense of being part of a democratic society. His loop closes with affirmation: he is heard, recognised, and made visible. This is what this thesis terms democratic legibility—a field in which participation creates inclusion by design.

But elsewhere, a second loop unfolds. On Chinese social media, he publicly criticised China's COVID-19 policy. His reason was not political, but scientific: "I openly opposed China's zero-

COVID policy because I'm a technology worker. You have to think independently. You have to have critical thinking." Here, the same identity is speaking. But the symbolic system it enters is different. His critique is not read as civic speech. It is read as disloyalty, as a disturbance. "Later, my posts were deleted by Chinese social media platforms," he explained. "So I rarely post anything there now." This is the field of authoritarian afterlife. In this structure, participation does not produce visibility. It produces punishment, or disappearance. The loop closes, but it closes on silence. His identity remains, but it is modulated into caution, withdrawal, and strategic absence.

A third loop operates in the semi-public terrain of digital diasporic platforms, especially WeChat. When discussing political disagreement online, he observed: "Censorship is getting worse. Especially on platforms like WeChat, where most of the audience is domestic. It's easy to have political disagreements, and they often lead to conflict." Yet he insists on continuing: "But I won't stop speaking. That's not a scientific attitude." He also speaks openly about the UK government: "The Conservative Party has completely messed up the economy. I've said this to many people—even on WeChat. The Conservative government is absolutely awful." Here, his critical stance is neither erased nor embraced. It is simply tolerated—floating in a grey space of algorithmic visibility, moral ambivalence, and platformed vulnerability. This is platformed sovereignty: not a state, but a structure of ambient power, where speech circulates without guarantee and identity is managed not by the state, but by systems, norms, and interfaces.

Across all three systems, his identity remains coherent as a critical intellectual. But the loops it enters produce different configurations of legibility, risk, and response. What returns is not a unified self, but a modular self—one that speaks differently within the same identity framework in each space, not because it is fragmented, but because the world is. His identity neither converges on the one direction nor diverge. It rotates through regimes that cannot be combined. This is what defines hybridity here: not multiple selves, but one identity looped across incommensurable political grammars, each of which rewrites it differently, and none of which can fully hold it together.

This is the core of hybridity—not the co-presence of multiple identities, but the irreconcilability of the fields in which those identities circulate. Where P13's identity becomes more coherent, and P7's more strained, P4's becomes more strategic. He is not more integrated, nor more alienated. He is more modulated, shifting across three symbolic systems, each with its own

demands, dangers, and grammars. The feedback loops remain, but they run along different axes, governed by rules that cannot be translated into each other.

What holds together is not a unified self, but a system of differentiated survival. Hybrid identity is not a midpoint between China and the UK. It is a practice of managing incommensurability—looping through multiple systems without the illusion of synthesis.

6.2.4 Sub-model Three: Latent Identity Activation Model

While still situated within the broader framework of Convergence–Divergence, the Latent Identity Activation Model focuses on a different form of movement—not the adjustment of identity content, but the intensification of identity presence. In this model, political participation does not create a new self, nor does it challenge or contradict existing identity structures. Instead, it brings forward an already present, but previously muted identity node, giving it visibility.

Participant P28 (Female, Chinese teacher) embodies this mechanism. As a scholar, she often positioned herself through intellectual distance and professional obligations. "I usually think about things from the perspective of a scholar," she said. "Sometimes I overlook the fact that I am also a teacher, someone with direct responsibility for my students." But this dormant awareness was activated during the early phases of the white paper protests in China. She recounted: "Actually, since we just mentioned the white paper movement, I might as well talk a little more about it. When the first wave of large-scale protests broke out, I had conversations with a few local colleagues whom I trust. I felt—not exactly agitated—but very moved. I thought: the young people in China are really incredible. I had this strong sense of being one of them. I also wanted to express my support in a way I thought was appropriate, especially as an intellectual."

Yet this expression was quickly confronted by another loop—her role as a Chinese teacher in a British university, embedded within institutional constraints and the vulnerability of visibility. "But when I walked into the university," she explained, "I felt that expressing myself like that might not be so appropriate. My student group is large. Some students are deeply opposed to such actions. And I didn't want to cause trouble for my department. As a Chinese heritage teacher, if you stand out in such an activist way, it easily causes division. Some students might admire you; others might fear you. And that's not good for the university." Here, the identity

as a teacher becomes visible with professional caution, institutional loyalty, and the ethics of care. The loop was not between old and new, but between latent and sharpened—a recalibration of expressive intensity, not semantic content.

A similar pattern unfolded for Participant P27 (Female, Lecturer). In a photo-elicitation interview, she responded to an image of a local community gathering: "Before I had a child, I didn't participate in community activities. But after giving birth, I saw a poster of a community event encouraging children to join, and I thought—why not? I just wanted my child to see the world a bit, to help him integrate." Her action began as maternal care, but looped into something else. "But during the event," she continued, "I started to realise—this community I live in is actually quite interesting. All these memories of being a resident here started to come back. I suddenly felt the charm of community life."

What changed was not her role as a mother or a resident, but the weight she assigned to that identity node. Participation activated it. And what returned was not a new role, but a stronger sense of what that role could mean. The loop here moved not between identities, but within one, from passive to active. This model, then, is defined not by identity shift but by identity activation. It shows how political engagement can reorder the internal hierarchy of the self, elevating positions that were always there but rarely mobilised. It is not about contradiction. It is about emergence. The migrants do not become someone else but become more of what they already were. The loop closes not with transformation, but with new visibility.

The three sub-models presented in this section reflect different ways in which identity and political participation interact. In the Convergence–Divergence Model, which is also the primary form of the loop model, participation strengthens or unsettles an identity within a single context, often deepening someone's sense of belonging or adjusting the original positions. The Hybrid Identity Model describes something different—when the same person moves between political environments that operate in completely different contexts. In those cases, the identity remains the same after the loop, but the way it is recognised or resisted changes depending on the system. And in the Latent Identity Activation Model, what matters is not that someone adopts a new identity, but that something already there becomes more visible—something quiet starts to speak a little louder.

Each model captures a different pattern. Some people move toward a clearer sense of who they are, some learn to speak differently in different places, and others begin to notice parts of

themselves they hadn't paid much attention to before. These are not final outcomes. They are movements—small shifts, quiet adjustments, different ways of staying in balance.

6.3 Dialectical–Emergence Model: Spiral Identity Reconstitution through Political Action

Not all participation leads back to what came before. In some cases, what begins as a small act, a protest, a public statement, a conversation, does not return neatly into the identity that made it possible. Instead, the act creates a fracture, one that cannot be absorbed into the existing structure. It is a disruption of the existing structure. A movement starts from here. This is where the Dialectical–Emergence Model begins.

Like the previous models, this one assumes a networked understanding of identity. The self is still made up of multiple positions—A_1, A_2, A_3...A_n—each shaped by diversified dimensions. But in this model, identities that experience political participation do not loop back into one or more of those nodes. It pulls the network out of balance and leads it to a new direction. Over time, this instability may begin to settle. But what returns is not the same configuration, slightly altered. It is something else: a reassembled new identity, C_1, C_2, or C_3. The self becomes something it had not yet imagined, not as a matter of choice, but as a matter of consequence. Participation, in this model, is not a management tool. Is it a catalytic event, forcing the person to confront?

Figure 2 Dialectical–Emergence Model

The abstract expressions of this model can be explained in detail through three submodels. Each reflects a different pathway through which identity is reconstituted after disruption. The first is the Transformative Interaction Model, where the political participation reshapes the participant's position. The second is the Political Fear Model, which posits that the act of political participation triggers internal conflict and eventually to a mechanism of self-protection. The third is the Spiritual Isolation Model. It implies that individuals are unable to reconcile political expression with institutional systems, turning toward spiritual or moral worlds. Each of these paths begins from the moment of the political action that destabilises the initial identity framework. From there, identity spirals, slowly, unevenly, toward forms it had not yet named.

6.3.1 Theoretical Premise of the Dialectical–Emergence Model: Identity as Product of Action, Emotion, and Constraint

In this model, identity does not return; it emerges. Migrants' understanding of this self does not simply shift between positions that they already have. The political participation makes something in motion that the existing identity structure cannot contain. So, the old loop-based model cannot explain this change, instead of an adjustment.

Like all models in this chapter, the Dialectical–Emergence Model still assumes that identity is made up of multiple parts, held in tension and coordination. But here, the network breaks open. Participation becomes a point of instability, not because the action is inherently radical, but because it forces the self into a space where no prior node is enough to hold what now needs to be said, felt, or accounted for. This understanding draws on insight that identity is not a precondition for action—it is a consequence of it. We become intelligible not by expressing who we are, but by acting in ways that produce the terms through which the self is later recognised (Butler, 1997). Participation here is not the performance of a stable subject. It is the site where that subject is rewritten—exposed, undone, and sometimes reorganised.

But such an emergence does not take place in the abstract. It is conditioned by the structures through which participation becomes legible—or not. Anthony Giddens' theory of the duality of structure reminds us that action is shaped by institutional constraints but may also feed back into those structures in ways that transform them (Giddens, 1984). Yet in this model, what changes is not the institution. It is the participant's position within it. The old self is no longer usable. A new position must be configured—often uncomfortably, often without clarity. Emotion is central to this process. As Ahmed (2004) has argued, emotions are not private states, but are forms of contact, alignment, and conflict. In moments of disruption, the self becomes saturated with feeling—but not in a way that reinforces its coherence.

The participant no longer asks, "How do I manage this identity?" They begin to ask, "Who am I after getting so many new feelings?" Frantz Fanon described this space as one of violent confrontation, where identity no longer returns because the world no longer allows it to (Fanon, 2004). Even in quieter registers, as Yuval-Davis has shown, belonging is always conditional—shaped by political boundaries, institutional tolerances, and positional risks (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

This is why the model must end not with a return, but with reconstitution. As Bourdieu (1990) might frame it, the field has shifted beneath the actor's feet, and now the actor must recalibrate their position. In other words, the loop continues, but no longer within a closed network. It spirals. And what returns is not an adjustment, but a different architecture of the self.

6.3.2 Transformative Interaction Model

Some forms of political participation do not return to identity at all, not even in adjusted form. They move through identity and out the other side. What begins as curiosity or solidarity, a willingness to attend or express, can sometimes reshape the individual's orientation in ways that go beyond role or affiliation. In this model, identity does not respond to action. It emerges from action, in response to a shared event, a collective rhythm, or the sudden recognition of a previously hidden emotional alignment. The loop is no longer circular. It is spiral. Participation makes it impossible to return to the same configuration.

Participant P34 (Male, Podcaster) offered a powerful description of this process. In the interview, he shared a photo of himself participating in a Pride march. "I do identify with this kind of social movement," he said. "And I think this kind of expression has value. I will participate in it. To be honest, I think for someone from a Chinese background, this is something we really need to learn. How to participate is not something you automatically know. You see the images in the news, but how to be part of it—this takes practice. It's a learning process."

For P34, the act of joining the march was not framed as activism at first. It was framed as observation, education, and engagement. "Even though I'm very interested in these things, I've never had the experience," he continued. "You don't need to be at the front of the march from the first second. If this kind of movement is part of social life, then participation is closely and organically connected to everyday urban life. It's not a dramatic gesture—it's a normal one. But that's something you have to learn." What participation gave him, he explained, was a sense of citizenship he didn't know he lacked. "This was like remedial education for me," he said. "Because in mainland China, there was never a space to practise anything like this."

Later in the interview, the tone shifted. "Now I think of this as a basic right," he said. "It reflects how much you care about your surroundings, how much you're willing to engage with the values you believe in. These methods need to be learned. But after participating, I feel like I

suddenly understood—this is completely different from what I experienced in China." What began as curiosity became conviction. The action did not express a stable identity. It revealed the lack of one, and then started to build it.

P18 (Female, Researcher) followed a similar path. Her political awareness did not begin in the UK. "At first, I joined protests against the Chinese government," she said. "I thought that I'm doing this because I have a conscience as a Chinese person. If I didn't have any connection to China, I wouldn't be doing this. But I have too many entanglements with China. That's why I care." She described her early memories of growing up in Guangzhou: watching Phoenix TV, listening to uncensored talk shows, and participating anonymously in local protests. "There was a time when the space to speak was much wider than now," she said. "We grew up with that. Even the movement to defend Cantonese—I remember it. That was in high school. Everyone went."

When she came to the UK, these fragments did not disappear. But it was only during the White Paper protests that they snapped into clarity. "Even though I wasn't there for the White Paper," she said, "I heard from friends—there were a lot of people. In Edinburgh, in Glasgow, even in Sydney. At that moment, I was empowered. Because before, you always thought you were alone. But suddenly, you realised so many people were angry too. It just needed a spark." What changed for her was not a belief. It was a threshold—a shift from solidarity to identity. "After that, I really embraced this idea of being a social activist," she said. "It's a way of expressing." For P18, the action rewrote her inner self. What began as an ethical reaction became a way of living, a way of naming and expressing herself. The movement did not reflect who she was—it taught her how to become that person.

This model captures the moments when participation creates not recognition, but transformation. The structure of identity does not adjust—it breaks, reforms, and begins to settle again around a different centre. The person is not acting as who they are. They are becoming someone else through actions. The new self may not be stable. It may not even be clear. But it is no longer what it was. And it cannot go back.

6.3.3 Political Fear Model

Some identity loops never complete. Not because they fail, but because they are cut off in advance. In the Political Fear Model, identity is not silenced after it speaks—it is silenced

before it arrives at speech. What we see is not A → B → A′, but something far more elusive: A → Φ. The loop closes not with transformation, not with modulation, but with a carefully maintained absence—a withdrawal structured not by ignorance or indifference, but by anticipation.

Participant P38 (Male, Researcher) spoke with striking clarity about this condition. "Deep down I'm actually quite radical," he said. "Back in China, I was once contacted by the national security bureau. They said I might have been in contact with Taiwanese spies—but I really didn't know anything." Later, after arriving in the UK, he tried again. "During the pandemic, I posted criticism of the zero-COVID policy on Weibo. I thought it was just a normal political expression." But then the phone rang. "A Chinese police officer called me and told me to delete the post." The message was simple: *we're still watching*. "Even though I was already in the UK," he said, "I still felt that pressure. So I stopped speaking on Chinese platforms."

This moment is not about punishment. It is about return. A structure long thought escaped suddenly reasserts itself from a distance—not through violence, but through quiet proximity. There is no visible consequence. But something shuts. The identity that was about to speak does not disappear. It folds. What returns is not silence, but calibrated non-expression. For many others, the loop collapses even earlier—before participation is even imagined as possible. Participant P30 (Female, Artist) described this with devastating precision: "This is about identity. I still hold a Chinese passport. My parents and my family are all in China. I'm not afraid of Britain. I'm afraid that everything is being recorded, that I'll be exposed and unable to stop it." Then, calmly: "If I had British nationality and didn't plan to return to China, I could participate in everything. But I can't."

Her words are not about ideology. They are about the structural fragility of the migrant position. "If something happens to me here, the UK might not protect me—I'm not a citizen. And whatever happens here might hurt my family over there." Her restraint is not the absence of conviction. It is the internalisation of geopolitical vulnerability—an identity trained to manage precarity by remaining invisible.

P15 (Male, Data Analyst) offered a different story, but the same structure. "From childhood, you are told—this kind of thing is extremely dangerous. I haven't naturalised. I'm still Chinese. This kind of action still has consequences." Then, more quietly: "And to be selfish—what good does it do me?" The cost is real. The benefit is unclear. The loop closes in advance.

Others no longer even consider the question. P12 (Female, HR) answered bluntly: "Isn't being alive enough? Why would I take that risk for people I don't even know?" Her words aren't cynical. She does not deny injustice. She simply sees no margin for entering the field. Her identity does not turn inward. It collapses under the weight of sustained non-possibility.

But the logic of political fear is not unique to old memory. It also moves inside liberal spaces, especially for those structurally excluded from full protection. Participant P3 (Male, International Student), watching a pro-Palestinian demonstration on the streets of London, said: "As a minority, I really sympathise. But I don't have citizenship yet. I need to stay safe. If my visa is revoked, I have nothing." His words are not about disagreement. They are about unbearable exposure.

In this model, the key event is not speech. It is the disappearance of the condition or chance for speech. The loop does not fail. It is pre-emptively evacuated. What returns is not a clearer self, not a heavier self, but a self that has learned how far it can go before it disappears. The act never happens, but the identity adjusts anyway. Not through modulation. Through anticipatory containment. Through the refusal of the future. Through a silent but tightly closed, from A $\rightarrow$ Φ.

6.3.4 Spiritual Isolation Model

Not all transformations happen through confrontation. The Spiritual Isolation Model begins like many others: with participation. But what makes it distinct is not the act itself, but what absorbs it. Here, the loop doesn't close back into the civic field. It turns into another orbit altogether—one where religious belonging becomes not one identity among others, but the centre around which all others must be re-aligned.

Participant P24 (Male, PhD, Anglican convert) did not describe a sudden conversion. His shift came slowly, through presence and repetition. "Sometimes I do hint at my political opinions," he said. "But really, my spiritual world is tied to the Lord." When asked what changed, he didn't mention an event. He described a rhythm: "After joining the Church of England, I began to see everything as part of God's grace. It helped me understand many things. I go to mass every week. Twice for evening prayers. It makes me feel full."

What matters is where this began. He did not find God in crisis. He found routine in community, a form of community participation that, by the analytical framework in Chapter 3, constitutes political engagement through belonging and shared activity. But this engagement did not return to strengthen his civic identity. It rotated—and became faith itself. Slowly, the church was no longer where he participated. It became where he understood who he was.

And this identity was not flexible. It was hierarchical. "Evangelical rituals are illegitimate," he said flatly. "They disrespect the Lord. I wouldn't associate with that." When I mentioned I had once attended a Mormon gathering, he looked sharply displeased: "That's not heresy," he said. "That's a cult." This was not mere doctrinal preference. It was epistemological isolation. The boundaries of belief had hardened into boundaries of social legitimacy. He was no longer navigating between civic and religious roles. He was now positioned entirely within a theological system, and everything outside it became suspect or false.

Participant P33 (Female, Evangelical Christian, casual worker) arrived by a different path, but landed in a similar place. "My family in China believed in God," she said, "but I only became truly devout after coming to the UK." Her early political actions were deeply intertwined with the Chinese church. "Back then, I was involved in the Chinese Christian community. But I've stopped going now." Why? "Because I don't think participating in secular politics is very meaningful. Democracy feels like a lie. The world belongs to God. These national borders— we shouldn't even have them. In God's eyes, none of these disputes matters."

What began as cultural continuity, an inherited faith, a community to step into, eventually transformed into a radical displacement of the civic field itself. She did not just stop participating. She redefined participation as misdirection. Only the sacred, the eternal, the borderless mattered now. Even her earlier forms of political engagement became, in retrospect, missteps.

What both cases reveal is that religious or spiritual participation, when it becomes isolating, does not simply offer another layer of identity. It offers a dominant frame, a structure into which all other identities must fit, or fall away. These are not people who left political life because they had no interest. Both began their transformation through activities that our typology defines as political: community engagement, ethical action, and ideological conversation. But the spiral here was not expressive. It was absorptive. They didn't reject the political. They replaced it, slowly, thoroughly, and with conviction. Religious identity is too

complicated, and without a Christian Science background, this part merely attempts to present a hint for us to understand how religion influences migrants' lives by creating a separate, safe place.

That is why this model is not a loop. It does not adjust an identity node, but rather it changes the gravity field. What returns is not the same person, slightly modified—but a new kind of self-anchored subject entirely outside the political grammar that first brought them in.

6.3.5 Summary

The three models in this section show how political participation can do more than adjust identity. it can disrupt it, overwhelm it, or redirect it entirely. For some, like P34 and P18, action opens a new sense of self that did not exist before. For others, like P38 or P30, the act never happens, yet the fear of it still reshapes how the self-moves in the world. While for participants like P24 and P33, participation leads not back into politics, but out of it—into faith, and into a structure that no longer needs recognition from the outside. What holds these models together is not the type of identity they generate, but the fact that none of them return to where they began.

6.4 Mapping the Interplay: From Regulatory Models to Strategic Trajectories

The six models developed across this chapter describe how identity is shaped through political participation, but they do not exist in isolation. They are not fixed types, nor do they belong to separate groups of people. Rather, they mark different pathways—different ways in which the self responds to opportunity, risk, and constraint. What matters is not where someone begins, but how they move: what opens, what closes, and what changes as they speak, act, or withdraw.

This section brings these models together. It asks how they interact, how individuals shift between them, and what structural pressures shape those shifts. The aim is not to classify behaviour, but to trace the patterns through which identity and participation are mutually adjusted. It also returns to a central claim of this thesis: that participation is not a fixed set of actions, but a field of regulation—a space where visibility, belonging, and silence are constantly negotiated. The analysis unfolds in four parts. First, it repositions the six models not as categories, but as explanatory tools. Then it explores how these models overlap and combine

in individual lives. It goes on to examine the broader environments—legal, national, digital—that make certain forms of movement possible and others dangerous. Finally, it draws these elements into a single interpretive frame, laying the groundwork for a modular understanding of identity–participation dynamics.

6.4.1 Visualising the Models: From Classification to Explanation

The six models developed in this chapter are not typologies of people. They are not meant to classify individuals into stable categories, but to trace the mechanisms by which identity and participation respond to different conditions. Each model represents a patterned adjustment—a way of acting, speaking, hesitating, or retreating in the face of political possibility. These models should be understood as explanatory units. They are not descriptions of the topology of identity but mechanisms for understanding how identity and political participation interact under different conditions. This explanatory frame helps us to understand a different kind of question, not about "What kind of migrant is it?", but "How does this person respond when political actions become difficult, risky or invisible?"

Each model presents a distinct explanatory pattern. Some describe how participation strengthens or adjusts existing identity positions (as in the Convergence–Divergence Model). Others explain how participation opens entirely new configurations of selfhood that were not previously accessible (as in the Transformative Interaction Model). Still others make visible how non-participation itself—through fear, silence, or strategic withdrawal—becomes an identity response to political structure (as in the Political Fear Model). The emphasis is not on what people believe, but on how identity becomes possible or impossible across structures.

This distinction builds on the analytical move made in Chapter 3, where participation is treated not as a fixed act, but as a situated practice shaped by expression, integration, and constraint. Each model, then, is a lens onto a specific tension between identity and participation. What makes them explanatory is that they reveal how migrants navigate the field, not where they stand, but how they move.

6.4.2 Nestedness and Sequencing: Dynamic Deployment of Identity Strategies

These models do not stand alone. They are not rigid containers. They are paths that can fold into each other, that move across time, and that often deepen rather than shift. Identity, in this

sense, is not built by selecting one position and staying there, but by passing through different mechanisms of alignment and regulation, depending on what the person encounters—and what that encounter asks of them.

Participant P1 (Female, Administrative staff) offers a clear example. She began her political engagement in China as a feminist. That position, critical, gendered, and often oppositional, already marked a political orientation. But after moving to the UK, she attended feminist gatherings and encountered the language and ethics of intersectionality. What began as a familiar identity began to stretch. She did not abandon feminism. She nested one mode within another: still feminist, but now within a broader and more reflexive frame. Her identity returned to itself, but not unchanged. This was a loop, but it was a loop with added weight.

Soon after, she stopped attending mainstream feminist events altogether. "Now I only join events organised by women of colour," she said. It was no longer just about gender—it was about visibility, race, history, and voice. The feminist identity had become an intersectional position with boundaries, one that no longer sought inclusion but coherence. At that point, the loop began to spiral. Exposure to overlapping systems of marginalisation—race, class, immigration status—did not just deepen her identity. It began to reframe it. Over time, she began to describe herself not just as a feminist, but as a social activist grounded in anti-colonial critique. Her language changed. Her targets changed. So did her sense of audience.

This was no longer an internal adjustment. It was a shift in political grammar. Her identity did not abandon feminism. It moved through it—looped, nested, and ultimately turned into something broader. What began in one model, Convergence–Divergence, moved into another: Transformative Interaction. And in between, her identity passed through a moment of strategic compartmentalisation, as she began to re-curate where and with whom she would appear.

The direction of movement is not always outward. Some forms of nesting are defensive. They begin with silence, open slightly under constrained conditions, and then close again—tighter, more strategic, and more private. Participant P9 (Male, International Student) described this dynamic with quiet intensity. "I'm very afraid of surveillance," he said, "even in the UK. You never know who is behind you, especially in Chinese communities or online platforms. You never know who is watching."

This fear was not abstract. It came from habit, memory, and a lived sense of threat. But he did not retreat entirely. "I still speak politically," he told me. "But only in encrypted spaces. Only on Signal or Telegram. Never on WeChat. Never on Twitter. I read, but I don't interact. And I always turn off my screen when people walk by." What emerged was not simple avoidance. It was a hybrid mode of expression—one that combined technological privacy with selective presence. His voice did not disappear, but moved. Away from the public, away from the audience, into an encrypted echo chamber where speech could still happen, but only under tight control. His identity did not shift toward expression. It shifted back into containment, though now with more awareness of its limits. The loop here is different from P1's. It does not spiral toward expansion. It spirals inward—from fear to temporary release, and then to a more reflexive and bounded silence. The hybrid model is not a destination. It is a brief shelter—a space for trying, not arriving.

This kind of trajectory reminds us that identity is not always trying to become more visible. Sometimes, it is trying to survive its own visibility. And the strategies people adopt—when to speak, where, to whom—are not steps on a path, but adjustments made within a moving structure. One model nests inside another. One logic overtakes the last. And the self, always recalibrating, never fully settles. This is what nestedness looks like. The person does not leave one model and enter another. They carry the traces of each movement. One logic embeds itself inside another, and what we see is not replacement but accumulation, redirection, tension. Identity becomes not a state, but a process of moving between available structures, and sometimes building a shelter when none of them quite fit.

6.4.3 Contextualising Mutual Constitution: Structural Conditions and Situated Responses

The six models described in this chapter are not responses to isolated choices or individual traits. Chapter 1 clearly outlined three situational contexts: authoritarian socialisation, the UK's multicultural and colonial democratic legibility, and digital disjuncture. These are not merely analytical categories. They are lived systems that organise how participation is felt, imagined, and withheld. China and its political system, in this research, is not treated as a regime left behind, but as a mode of political conduct that continues to shape perception and judgment. Political action is not framed as a right to be exercised, but as a moral act to be weighed. This orientation is not simply fear-based. It is structured through education, media, family relations,

and public rituals that encode the state not only as a repressive force but as a source of coherence and virtue. For migrants, this form of socialisation does not dissolve. It relocates. Participant P38 (Male, Researcher), for instance, withdrew from digital expression entirely after receiving a call from Chinese police while living in the UK. He did not need to be punished. The structure he had internalised had already done its work. For P30 (Female, Artist), political visibility was never even considered. Her Chinese passport, her family in China, and her understanding of how quickly risk travels were enough to close the loop in advance. The Political Fear Model is not merely psychological. It is an expression of structural internalisation: a logic of governance that moves with the migrant.

But the old political system does not only produce withdrawal. It can also shape the logic of moral retreat and relocation. In the Spiritual Isolation Model, participants such as P24 (Male, PhD) reframe political contradiction through spiritual hierarchy. His identity does not disappear from the political space. It reappears in another structure—one defined not by negotiation, but by clarity and ritual sovereignty. In this sense, the spiritual world is not a shelter. It is a replacement.

The second structuring context is the logic of multicultural recognition. As explored in Chapter 1.3.2, multiculturalism in the UK does not dissolve difference; it manages it. Visibility is not uniformly distributed. It is granted under certain expectations: performative clarity, cultural readability, and institutional familiarity. Migrants who do not meet these expectations may not be punished, but they become unintelligible. Participant P13 (Female, journalist) benefited from this system: her civic activity—voting, canvassing, campaigning—was recognisable and therefore affirmable. She was heard because she spoke in a language the system could already interpret. But others, like P28 (Female, Chinese teacher), moved within much narrower symbolic bandwidths. As a university lecturer, she supported the White Paper protests, but her ethical action immediately collided with the professional caution imposed by her institutional role. She did not reject politics. She simply understood the cost of saying too much in the wrong space.

P1's (Female, Administrative Staff) case reveals a more layered entanglement with this context. Starting from feminist engagement, she gradually moved into an intersectional frame and eventually adopted an anti-colonial political stance. This was not simply a radicalisation. It was a response to limits—moments where her presence in feminist spaces felt conditional, where racialised power made itself felt, and where she came to realise that certain political voices,

even when loud, were still illegible in dominant discourse. Her trajectory was not a self-expression. It was a strategy of navigating unreadability.

The third context is digital disjuncture. First-generation Mainland Chinese migrants do not move between online platforms neutrally. They inhabit a divided digital ecology, where platforms are not just technical tools but infrastructures with surveillance and regulation functions. As described in Chapter 1.3.3, platforms such as WeChat or Red Note operate through a logic that diverges sharply from British civic expectations. Participant P9 (Male, International Student) navigates this situation carefully. He speaks only in encrypted channels, avoids open platforms, and manages his digital self across multiple systems. To understand how a migrant chooses to speak, to act, or to step back, one must first understand what they have learned to anticipate, and what they know they cannot afford to ignore.

6.4.4 Theoretical Synthesis: Towards a Situated Theory of Identity–Participation Interplay

Models developed in this chapter are not true technical models. They explain mechanisms that interpret how identity and participation interact in flexible yet coherent ways. Participation, in this view, is not a stable act. It is a moving strategy: sometimes forward, sometimes inward, sometimes held in reserve. Identity, too, is not what comes before action, but often what remains after action is tested, resisted, or withdrawn. The models developed here are not types of people, nor stages of development. They are tools for understanding how migrants manage contradiction: how they live between different expectations, how they adapt to being misread, how they recalibrate expression under pressure. Each model becomes active not in isolation, but in tension with others—looping, spiralling, or expanding as the situation shifts. And each is shaped by structural conditions.

The six models advanced in this chapter are not types of people but model-based explanations of how identity and political participation co-constitute each other under specific structural conditions. They share a single analytic architecture—an interpretive, co-constitutional view of identity, read through the Expression × Integration field and distinguished by two dynamics (loop vs spiral). Each model is bounded by a clear set of criteria (triggering condition, core operation, observable outputs, and its characteristic movement on the two axes), which provides discriminant validity:

Convergence–Divergence captures looped micro-adjustments within one democratic grammar. *Hybrid Identity* maps looped movement of the same stance across incommensurable regimes (authoritarian afterlife / democratic legibility/platform sovereignty). *Latent Identity Activation* denotes a rise in salience rather than a change in content. *Transformative Interaction* identifies spiral reconstitution (from A to a novel configuration C) evidenced by durable shifts in self-description and practice. *Political Fear* specifies pre–emptive closure $(A \rightarrow \emptyset)$ grounded in anticipated sanctions and transnational vulnerability. *Spiritual Isolation* traces an absorptive spiral in which theological ordering replaces civic grammar.

These models should not be read as an exhaustive inventory of all possible identity–participation dynamics among first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants, nor as universally applicable templates for other migrant groups. They are the models that have emerged from, and can be substantiated by, the empirical materials collected in this study. Their scope is therefore bounded by the structural conditions that frame this fieldwork: the afterlife of authoritarian socialisation, the specific logics of multicultural recognition in the UK, and the dual-platform digital environment linking China and Britain.

While the conceptual architecture—the co-constitutional approach and the Expression × Integration lens—may travel to other contexts, the particular configurations described here reflect the situated nature of this research. Within these declared conditions, the six models are internally coherent, mutually distinguishable as models (though combinable in lived practice), and empirically anchored. Future work, especially with longitudinal designs or comparative cases beyond the PRC–UK corridor, will almost certainly reveal additional models or different alignments of those presented here.

To speak of the identity–participation interplay, then, is to speak of a process that is both strategic and unfinished. What matters is not only what people do, but how they understand the field in which they act—or choose not to. The six models, and the contexts that shape them, together offer a way of mapping that field: not as a fixed landscape, but as a dynamic structure of possibilities, limits, and recalibrations.

The next chapter takes up this task directly to discuss how, if participation is neither linear nor final, we might understand its modular character. How do migrants move across forms of action, not by changing who they are, but by changing how they are allowed to appear? These are the questions the following chapter seeks to answer.

Chapter 7 Discussion – Configuring Identity and Participation: The Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC)

7.1 Introduction: From Fragmented Findings to Configurational Explanation

This chapter does not begin with new data but instead offers a shift in perspective. Drawing on the findings presented in the previous two chapters, this chapter seeks to engage with these findings alongside existing theories and to elaborate on them further.

The six models outlined in Chapter 6—Hybrid Identity, Convergence–Divergence, Latent Activation, Political Fear, Spiritual Isolation, and Transformative Interaction—do not function as descriptive classifications. They are not types in the conventional sense. Instead, they are structural responses: situated strategies used by first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants in the UK as they navigate political life across and against the enduring pressures of authoritarian memory, racialised mistrust, and digitally-mediated visibility. The task of this chapter is to assemble those movements into a coherent explanatory system—not to resolve contradiction, but to render it theoretically legible.

To do so demands stepping beyond some of the dominant theoretical languages of integration and participation studies. Since the 1990s, frameworks such as Berry's (1997) acculturation model and Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory have profoundly shaped how migrant identity and civic incorporation are understood. Berry's quadrantal schema, with its tidy division between assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation, presumes a logic of cultural resolution. Portes and Zhou (1993), though more structurally attuned, still locate migrant adaptation within bounded "pathways" tied to class reproduction, ethnic capital and institutional opportunity. Meanwhile, political scientists following Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) continue to evaluate participation through the lens of civic voluntarism—treating political behaviour as the outcome of resource possession, recruitment networks, and psychological engagement. What these traditions share, across disciplines, is a belief that identity coheres and participation is expressed. What if, as this study suggests, the experience

of migration from an authoritarian regime produces neither clarity nor resolution, but continuous recalibration and a complicated synthesis?

In this chapter, I argue that identity among first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants in the UK does not converge towards coherence, nor does participation represent stable intent. Rather, both are governed by a logic of conditionality, modulated through structural boundaries, emotional memories, and technological architectures. Identity is not possessed but configured. Participation is not performed but recalibrated based on conditions.

This reframing requires a departure from typological analysis towards configurational explanation. The models presented in the empirical chapters were not ends in themselves, but entry points into a deeper conceptual problem: how to understand political behaviour when expression is dangerous, when silence is strategic, and when identity is not a singular trajectory but a modular composition. These are not abstract challenges—they are real-world dynamics played out daily in the lives of migrants caught between states, systems, and memories.

As an academic work, this thesis fully recognises that identity is only one among many factors shaping political participation. Structural incentives, affective attachments, institutional accessibility, and transnational pressures all co-produce the conditions under which participation becomes possible. Yet what this study emphasises is not identity as a singular cause but viewing identity-political participation as a modular mechanism—a configuration space through which political agency is made contingent. In this sense, identity is not inherently explanatory, but becomes explanatorily useful only when understood as a site of negotiation, adjustment, and strategic recalibration.

For instance, when Participant P4 (Male, Engineer) stated that "I don't protest and may never will," yet remains active in Chinese-language WeChat groups disseminating critical commentary on both British and Chinese governance in a cautious manner, this is not disengagement. It is a calibrated withdrawal from potential exposure, coupled with a symbolic form of encrypted participation. Similarly, Participant 1(Female, Administrative Staff) described that the incident that she experienced, a kind of segregation and isolation during a white-led feminist event, triggered her identity development. Later, the more frequent mobilisations pushed her to transform her identity. "I didn't think I cared until I was pushed," she said. What changed was not only ideology, but permission—a new identity node activated by structural rupture. Neither case aligns with models of civic voluntarism or integration

through recognition. They speak to something more dynamic, more situated, more complicated and more constrained.

This chapter responds by proposing a new analytical lens based on the summary and discussion of the previous two chapters: the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC). This framework does not seek to classify migrants by type, nor to predict political action based on demographic indicators. Instead, it offers a structural explanation of how identity and participation emerge as co-constituted practices under constraint. Within the MIPC model, participation is not a choice or a statement of allegiance, but the residue of visibility—what remains when identity strategies have been adjusted, recombined, or changed in response to political danger, platformed exposure, or affective fatigue.

This conceptual shift works across three key assumptions: Firstly, identity is modular, composed of multiple nodes—cultural, political, generational, digital—that are activated or deactivated based on situational logics rather than long-term trajectories (Roccas and Brewer, 2002). Secondly, political participation is conditional, not a stable indicator of civic commitment. It is a fluctuating phenomenon based on evaluating conditions (Schaffer, 1998; Isin, 2009). Thirdly, visibility is negotiated, not assumed. Migrants from mainland China operate in fields where being seen can mean being punished—socially, institutionally, or even transnationally (Tsourapas, 2018). As such, participation often emerges not in its manifest forms—such as, protesting or criticising —but in latent, symbolic, or deferred modalities.

The structure of this chapter follows the logic of this argument. Section 7.2 critically revisits dominant theories of participation and integration, demonstrating how the empirical findings in this study contest their foundational assumptions. Section 7.3 turns inward, analysing the emotional infrastructures of political fear and the residual power of authoritarian socialisation. Section 7.4 focuses outward, to digital spaces, where expression is simultaneously enabled and shrivelled, fragmented and ritualised. Finally, in Section 7.5, the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration is introduced and explicated in full, not as a typology but as a relational system—a grammar for understanding how migrant identities is managed and how political agency is assembled, even when unspoken.

This is not a chapter that seeks closure. MIPC is not a totalising model; it is a situated grammar. It does not presume coherence, but dwells in tension. It offers not a new box to sort migrants into, but a new vocabulary to describe how they move through constraint, across platforms,

beneath visibility thresholds, and around the legacies of political fear. In this sense, it does not resolve the contradictions of the empirical material. It names them. And in naming, it makes them speakable.

To analyse political participation and identity among migrants from authoritarian regimes is to enter a field where participation often begins where voice ends. This chapter offers not a map, but a compass—aligned not to normative outcomes, but to shifting forms of agency, configured under constraints.

7.2 Beyond Integration: Rethinking Identity–Participation Models

For decades, research on migration and political participation has relied upon models that frame participation as the behavioural endpoint of successful integration, and identity as a coherent set of cultural or national affiliations. From Berry's (1997) acculturation model to Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation theory, and the civic voluntarism framework in political science (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995), the migrant subject is constructed as legible, measurable, and ideally convergent. These models differ in disciplinary emphasis, but converge around a shared assumption: that political participation is both expressive and integrative.

This assumption does not hold when applied to first-generation Chinese migrants from Mainland China, whose political strategies are shaped not by linear integration or stable self-identification, but by conditional visibility, digital modulation, and the residual affective force of authoritarian socialisation. The identity strategies and six models developed in Chapters 5 and 6 do not disprove integration theory, but they do reframe its logic. In this section, I revisit the dominant models not simply to critique them, but to demonstrate how they fail to account for participation that is partial, encrypted, or defensive.

Berry's (1997) well-known acculturation framework defines four possible outcomes—assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation—based on the migrant's orientation towards heritage culture and the host society. While this model has been influential in psychology and policy discourse, it treats identity as a cultural positioning and assumes that participation flows from a resolved orientation. But many participants in this study show that participation does not follow cultural resolution. For example, Participant P10 (Female, Waiter) identified strongly with Chinese cultural practices but was actively involved in the Student

Union election, which she had no idea of before. For her, participation was not a sign of identification with liberal ideology, but a practical mode of navigating where "decisions are made that affect my own right." She voted for a candidate from Mainland China, which further strengthened her national pride as a Mainland Chinese. Her civic action did not reflect "integration" in Berry's (1997) sense; it reflected what I term in Chapter 6 as the Convergence–Divergence Model—a strategic dualism where behavioural proximity does not equate to symbolic belonging.

Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation model offers a more structurally attuned approach, emphasising how migrants follow distinct paths of incorporation shaped by race, class, and community resources. Yet even here, the metaphor of "pathways" assumes directionality and gradual adaptation. It does not account for forms of recursive or interrupted engagement, nor for the ambivalence that many participants expressed. Participant P36 (Male, Grocery Store staff), who had naturalised as a British citizen, continued to withhold political opinion in both public and private settings: "There's no benefit in saying what you think," he noted. "It only causes misunderstanding." Despite institutional incorporation, his identity remained in suspension, a case of political fear coexisting with formal belonging, captured in the Political Fear Model developed in this study.

Political scientists, in contrast, have approached participation from a behavioural perspective. Verba, Schlozman and Brady's (1995) civic voluntarism model argues that individuals participate when they have the necessary resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment opportunities. However, this model assumes that when conditions are met, action will follow. It cannot account for strategic non-participation, where individuals have resources but choose to remain silent or act symbolically. Participant P23 (Female, Farmer), for instance, had high levels of education (Bachelor), income (her husband is the owner of a large farm), and institutional knowledge, choosing to keep quiet. She explicitly avoided formal channels due to what she called the "emotional cost of exposure." This is not a failure of mobilisation; it is a rejection of the visibility terms on which participation is invited.

What these dominant frameworks miss is the regulatory environment in which participation becomes possible or not. They assume that participation expresses preference, that visibility is benign, and that identity is a knowable orientation. This study's empirical findings undermine all three assumptions: Silence is not equal to absence: As demonstrated in the Political Fear and Spiritual Isolation models, silence is often a form of managed presence. It is used to avoid

scrutiny, protect family networks, or maintain moral clarity under conflicting loyalties (Tsourapas, 2018).

Expression does not imply loyalty: Many forms of civic participation are instrumental or symbolic rather than affective. Participants may volunteer, vote, or speak publicly not for identification, but to manage risk or signal compliance. The Hybrid Identity Model exemplifies this, where identity is performed differently across platforms and audiences. This is more like a strategic choice. Integration is not an indicator of Belonging: The Convergence–Divergence and Latent Identity Activation models show that moments of high engagement are often triggered not by institutional opportunity, but by emotional rupture or exclusion. Participant P1 (Female, Administrative Staff), who became politically active after experiencing exclusion in a feminist event, articulated this shift clearly: "I didn't want to become political, but I had to. I was made visible in the wrong way." These contradictions reveal that what we observe as political participation is, in many cases, a remainder—what becomes possible after structure, fear, and misrecognition are accounted for. Participation, in this framework, is not an action of civic alignment but the residue of identity modulation under constraint.

This conceptual reframing lays the groundwork for the MIPC framework introduced in Section 7.5. Where dominant models locate individuals within typologies or pathways, MIPC focuses on the mechanisms of identity regulation. Identity is not a role or essence, but a composite of modular nodes—cultural, religious, political, digital—that are selectively activated or suppressed. Participation is not expressive behaviour, but a moment of conditional visibility, often unstable and partial.

7.3 Political Fear, Emotional Governance, and Strategic Withdrawal

If the previous section dismantled the idea that participation expresses belonging, this section challenges another foundational assumption in integration theory: that silence is a sign of absence. In many liberal-democratic accounts of civic participation, political withdrawal is interpreted as a deficit of integration, an index of alienation, or a lingering effect of authoritarian passivity (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). What such interpretations fail to recognise is that silence, especially among first-generation Chinese migrants from Mainland China, is often not a void but a strategic configuration—one shaped by structural memory, transnational surveillance, emotional risk, and moral ambiguity. This section advances one of the key theoretical contributions of this thesis: the articulation of the expression compression

mechanism—a concept that reframes silence not as political emptiness, but as a residue of constrained agency.

The Political Fear Model, developed in Chapter 6, reveals how fear is neither irrational nor episodic, but calculated and sustained. Participant P24 (Male, PhD) vividly described how he avoided signing an online petition related to the Hong Kong protests (He had not joined the Church of England at that time): "From my own perspective, I know there are many misunderstandings between mainland migrants and Hong Kong protestors. I even tried to organise a dialogue to address these confrontations, but my kindness was interpreted by some Hong Kongers as a kind of support. They then asked me to sign a petition, which I immediately refused. I clearly understand the risks involved. I don't wish to discuss it further, but you know what I mean."

This refusal to express is not disengagement; it is self-preservation. His silence is not born of apathy, but of affective management, a disciplined refusal to be drawn into visibility on hostile terms. Scott (1990) provides the conceptual foundation for understanding such acts as forms of hidden transcript, expressions of dissent, judgment, or reflection that are kept offstage in the presence of perceived power. In Scott's account, oppressed or vulnerable actors develop practices of euphemism, misdirection, and withdrawal that serve not as resistance in the overt sense, but as everyday tactics of survival. In this light, P24's decision is not politically empty, but politically saturated. It reflects an awareness that speech is not merely expressive, but also expositional, that it can incur risk not just to the self, but to relational networks of responsibility that stretch across borders.

This awareness is not abstract. As Tsourapas (2018) argues, authoritarian emigration regimes extend their reach beyond national borders through surveillance, diplomatic controls, and diaspora inner regulation. For migrants, the memory of coercion is accompanied by a persistent anticipation of repercussion, an ambient threat that renders political expression a calculation, not a right. This sense of permanent legibility, the possibility that one's actions might be read by hostile others—shapes how participation is negotiated, avoided, or symbolically displaced.

The Spiritual Isolation Model illustrates another dimension of this regulation, which involves emotional withdrawal into the spiritual domains. Participant P33 (Female, Casual worker) described how her religious conversion changed her relationship with civic engagement: "I used to follow political news closely. Now I abandon it. Not because I don't care, but because

it makes me feel toxic, like I'm carrying something hypocritical. Prayer is safer. It gives me distance." This is not mere retreat; it is a relocating of moral engagement—a shift from contested public terrain to a controlled ethical interior.

Such reconfiguration resonates with Michel Foucault's (1979) notion of governmentality, where power operates not through direct repression, but through the shaping of conduct, through the management of risk, the anticipation of exposure, and the internalisation of visibility. Migrants, in this sense, are not silenced by force, but by structure. The structure is constrained across contexts in China, in the UK, and in digital spaces. Yuval-Davis (2011) reminds us that belonging is always political. It is not only about cultural proximity or legal status, but about conditional recognisability, the extent to which one can be seen without triggering misrecognition. In such contexts, participation becomes less about inclusion and more about navigation. To belong is not necessarily to speak, but to avoid the kind of speech that marks one as suspect. Thus, withdrawal is not the opposite of engagement—it is a refracted engagement, enacted through silence, substitution, or encrypted practice.

What emerges across these accounts is a patterned response to structural constraint: the compression of political expressiveness. In the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC), this is formalised as the expression compression mechanism—a process by which political agency is not erased, but condensed, hidden, or deferred. This mechanism explains why individuals who are well-informed, civically eligible, and socially engaged may still choose not to participate formally.

Crucially, this mechanism is not pathological. It is adaptive. It reflects the intersection of emotional inheritance, digital infrastructure, and political memory. To conclude: fear, in this context, is not an obstacle to agency. It is its condition. And silence is not the end of politics. It is where politics begins again under constraint, but never entirely out of reach. The dynamics of expression compression do not end in face-to-face or formal arenas; they travel into the spaces where most civic talk now takes place. However, digital platforms do not simply host expression—they reset its costs and leave records of what survives. Persistence, searchability, screenshot-ability, and audience collapse mean that compressed expression materialises as platform traces. The next section examines these architectures of visibility and shows how they shape not only what can be said, but what remains as a digital residue.

7.4 Digital Sovereignty and Platformed Visibility

If political fear governs how migrants learn to speak less, digital platforms increasingly determine where, how, and under what conditions such speaking is made possible at all. Among first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants in the UK, the act of political expression is rarely a matter of public declaration. It is shaped instead by digital infrastructures that both enable communication and structure visibility. Platforms such as WeChat, Telegram, WhatsApp, and Red Notes have become central to how migrants manage risk, negotiate belonging, and adjust the boundaries of what they are willing to say. In these mediated spaces, political participation rarely disappears—it changes form. It is not always expressed clearly or directly; it often survives as residue.

This section develops the core mechanism of the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC): the residue of visibility. Following the concept of expression compression and building on the Political Fear and Spiritual Isolation Models discussed earlier, it argues that participation in digital space often occurs not through clear assertions of identity or belief, but through acts that are minimised, delayed, encrypted, or diverted. These expressions remain, but only as what is left after visibility has been negotiated. Stakeholders of political participation on digital platforms are not merely migrants and authorities, but the technology itself and third-party technical giants behind it.

Participant P29 (Female, Dependent), who had lived in the UK for over a 2 decades, described how she uses digital platforms to follow Chinese politics but never comments publicly. "I only forward articles, and only in my private groups," she said. Chinese digital platforms are important to me. Chinese digital platforms are distinct from their mainstream British counterparts. They serve many functions, so I must be very cautious about using them. If my account is blocked or I am deleted by WeChat, it is very difficult to restore it, and I will lose the opportunity to engage with my community. Therefore, my behaviour within the British Chinese digital community here is still very much in line with typical Chinese style. You must know what I mean by Chinese style."

This type of behaviour is not apathy. It is a method of staying just visible enough to register interest or affiliation, without inviting scrutiny. It reflects a broader strategy common among participants: engage selectively, limit exposure, and leave behind traces that are hard to pin down. These practices do not emerge in isolation. As Foucault (1979) argued, modern power

no longer depends on direct repression alone. Instead, it operates through architectures of visibility, in which subjects regulate themselves because they never fully know when or by whom they are being observed. In the digital age, this logic is magnified. Instability and the blackbox-like feature make these platforms untrustworthy.

In authoritarian contexts, this uncertainty is not merely hypothetical. Pearce and Kendzior (2012), writing about "networked authoritarianism," argue that authoritarian states increasingly permit controlled forms of online participation to create the appearance of openness while maintaining deep systems of surveillance. In the Chinese context, as Roberts (2018) shows, censorship often works not through brute force, but through strategic distraction, guided framing, and managed visibility. Migrants socialised within such systems often carry this logic with them, even across borders. For first-generation mainland migrants in the UK, these dynamics are further shaped by transnational considerations. As Tsourapas (2018) notes, authoritarian states frequently extend influence beyond their borders through a mix of diaspora outreach, consular monitoring, and informal reporting structures. Migrants may thus fear not only surveillance by platforms, but also consequences for family or professional networks that remain connected to the PRC. Even participants P39 (Male, Chef), P35(Female, Grocery store owner) and P36 (Male, Grocery store staff) who had lived in the UK for more than 10 to 30 years described themselves as "careful online." As one put it: "I feel safe, but not fully. I don't want to be blocked at the border when I enter China in the future."

This caution is not only about the state. As Yuval-Davis (2011) argues, recognition in any community, national, ethnic, or diasporic, is shaped by conditional performances of acceptability. Migrants must manage multiple audiences: friends, relatives, co-ethnics, and state observers, both real and imagined. What appears as passive online behaviour may in fact be a layered strategy of impression management. One participant P21(Female, Administrative Staff) described liking patriotic posts in Chinese group chats "just try to not to be left alone." Another P37 (Female, Start-up Business owner) chose only to comment in English for non-Chinese content on UK platforms, saying, "At least I can't be read the same way." The digital platform gives her a chance to show different faces to different audiences using the same method. People in the Chinese community may still recognise that she is political and may not care about Chinese affairs. She is safe and apolitical. For the British audience, they may recognise her as someone attempting to integrate but still maintaining some distance.

These decisions form a pattern. They show that digital participation is not disappearing, but being carefully adjusted to conditions of platformed legibility. What people say online—how, where, and to whom—is shaped by a balancing of presence and protection. Identity is not erased; it is reconfigured under constraint. The MIPC framework captures this through the concept of residue of visibility. In contrast to participation models that assume visible action reflects internal preference, this study finds that what migrants express digitally is often only what survives a long process of strategic filtering. They engage, but indirectly. They speak, but carefully. They participate, but only after deciding what level of exposure feels survivable. The result is not disengagement. It is a different form of presence, reduced, refracted, and deferred.

Understanding this requires us to shift how we interpret digital silence. It is not always absent. Sometimes it is the compressed trace of something more complex: political concern expressed obliquely; affiliation signalled without declaration; belief acted upon without being named. Participation, here, is not what one says, but what one is willing to let be seen. This is not going to deny radical digital participation like expressing critical comments on the government or organising online protests. But, clearly from my data material, I found nothing related to it. Maybe a larger sample and deeper research can give a further answer.

Put simply, two linked ideas organise what we have seen. Expression compression is the process by which people narrow, redirect, or delay their political expression when they judge the risks to be high. Residue of visibility is the result, and in this study, it is mainly digital: the platform-visible trace left after filtering—likes without comments, silent shares into private groups, reposts with neutral captions, switching to English to limit legibility, or pseudonymous/time-shifted posts. Compression can happen anywhere; residue is what platforms record. Together they form one mechanism. Compression shapes the path from identity to action; residue shows what survives as observable practice online. The next section brings these strands into a single framework, the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC), linking them to identity nodes, fields of constraint, and the modular ways migrants combine or withhold parts of themselves when acting politically.

7.5 From Typology to Configuration: The Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC)

What this thesis has uncovered through six models, three analytic chapters, and interviews is not a typology of migrants, nor a causal explanation of political behaviour. What emerges instead is a different way of understanding participation under constraint—not as a function of identity, nor as a reflection of civic integration, but as the outcome of strategic modulation within structural tension. This section introduces and defines the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC) approach, a framework that moves away from classificatory approaches and instead offers a configurational analysis of how identity and participation interact in uncertain political terrain.

The MIPC framework is not a typology. It does not group migrants into fixed categories or map them along developmental axes. Nor is it a causal model that predicts outcomes based on variables like education, legal status, or political interest. Rather, it is a configurational practice system: a way of mapping how individuals assemble, combine, suppress, or adjust different identity elements.

The framework rests on five core components：First, it begins with the idea of identity nodes—that is, the discrete but interconnected elements through which migrants define, express, and protect themselves (The structure can refer to Figure 1 and Figure 2). These may include cultural affiliation, political ideology, religious belief, professional identity, gender roles and more. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have argued, identity is not a coherent substance but a flexible positioning across different domains. This thesis finds that migrants often activate some of these nodes while suppressing others, depending on context. Like the example from Chapter 6, Participant P1(Female, Administrative staff) expressed strong feminist commitments in English-speaking civic spaces but deliberately avoided gender discourse in Chinese-language groups. Her identity was not fixed, but selectively activated across platforms and audiences.
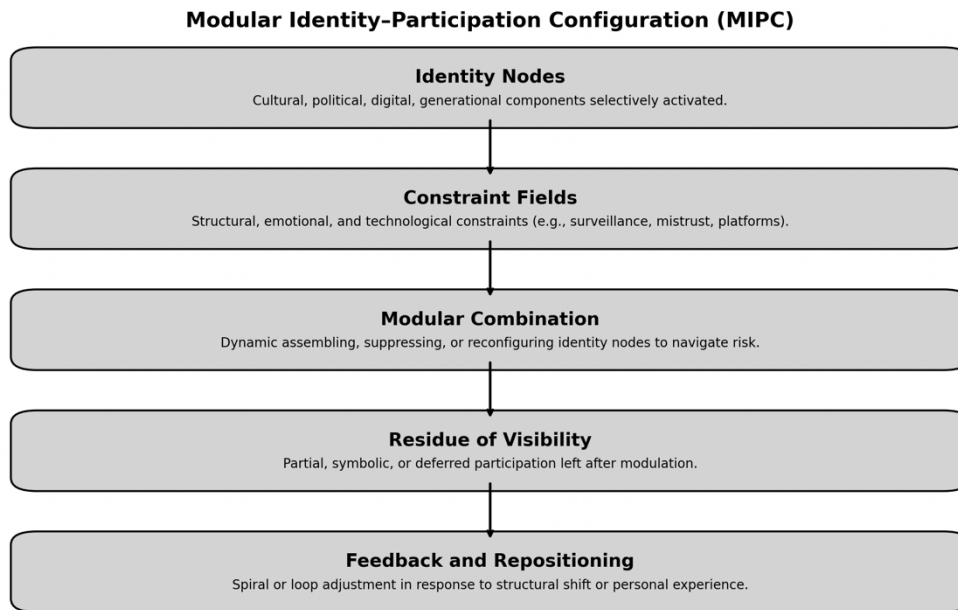
Second, these nodes are not configured in a vacuum. They exist within fields of constraint—social, political, and digital structures that shape what can be said, where, and to whom. These constraints include transnational surveillance (Tsourapas, 2018), ambient fear (Scott, 1990), community norms (Yuval-Davis, 2011), and the algorithmic architecture of digital platforms

(Roberts, 2018). Constraints are not uniformly experienced; some participants with UK citizenship still described feeling "watched," while others found local political spaces more alienating than digital ones. What matters is not the formal status of safety, but the perceived risk of exposure.

Third, MIPC operates on a principle of modular combination, a process where individuals assemble and modify identity elements to suit their current context. Similar to a modular system where components can be rearranged without changing the core structure, migrants adapt their expressive strategies by reconfiguring nodes in new ways. For instance, Participant P29 (Female, Dependent) did not vote but often shared local election news in Chinese WeChat groups, using her British Citizen identity to frame her commentary while avoiding revealing her political views. This was not contradictory; rather, it was a form of combination—an arrangement that enabled political participation without direct exposure.

Fourth, this modulation produces what Section 7.4 examined in detail: the residue of visibility. It comes from the expression compression process discussed in Section 7.3. Compression narrows or redirects expression to avoid risk. Residue is what is left after that narrowing. It is how the reduced expression becomes visible in digital settings. Section 7.3 explains the process. Section 7.4 shows the result and how it moves online. In MIPC, residue of visibility connects process and context. Compression decides what remains. Platform logics shape how that remainder appears, how long it stays, and how others read it. The forms are often small but telling—silent shares, coded words, pseudonyms, or absence in one space with presence in another. These are not failures of participation. They are visible marks of strategic caution, formed where political fear meets the limits of digital visibility.

Fifth, MIPC considers feedback and repositioning. Migrants do not establish their identities once and for all. Instead, their identities respond over time to changes in different contexts, as demonstrated in 6.4.2. In this sense, participation does not follow a straight line but develops through a spiral or loop of repositioning. Each action may produce new risks, recognitions, and recalibrations.

Modular Identity-Participation Configuration (MIPC)

Identity Nodes
Cultural, political, digital, generational components selectively activated.

Constraint Fields
Structural, emotional, and technological constraints (e.g., surveillance, mistrust, platforms).

Modular Combination
Dynamic assembling, suppressing, or reconfiguring identity nodes to navigate risk.

Residue of Visibility
Partial, symbolic, or deferred participation left after modulation.

Feedback and Repositioning
Spiral or loop adjustment in response to structural shift or personal experience.

Figure 3 Logic of The Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC)

Together, these five components form a practice system that explains why participation is often partial, symbolic, or indirect, which is not because migrants are disengaged, but because they are strategically responding to a landscape where expression always carries weight.

In doing so, MIPC repositions participation within the broader frame. It directly enriches models like Verba, Schlozman and Brady's (1995) civic voluntarism framework, which assumes participation arises from resources, engagement, and recruitment. It enriches Berry's (1997) acculturation model, where integration is the ideal endpoint of dual identification. It also enriches Dalton's (2008) civic norms thesis, which links participation to generational liberalisation. And it expands on Hall's (1996b) cultural politics of identity by insisting that identity is not only expressed, but tactically withheld. MIPC does not deny that migrants engage politically. It shows how that engagement is made possible, under constraint, through adjustment, and often without clear articulation. This is not a theory of types, but of movements. Not a model of prediction, but of positioning. Not a map of where migrants belong, but a compass for how they move.

7.6 Conclusion and Reflection: Migrant Political Agency under Constraint – Towards a Situated Framework

This chapter began with fragments—six models and diversified identities—and has worked to gather them not into unity, but into a grammar. The idea of "grammar" here is intentional. Rather than seeking coherence or final classification, the chapter has traced a pattern of strategic practice—how migrants assemble, disassemble, and recombine elements of political and personal identity under conditions of constraint. In the same way that grammar enables meaning through structure without prescribing a single message, the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC) framework offers an analytic language that makes contradiction intelligible without resolving it. This form of theoretical articulation matters because much of what first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants' political activities are fragmented, implicit, or symbolic. It cannot be captured through typologies that assume fixed identity, nor by behavioural models that presume open participation. What is needed is a system that explains how agency is expressed through partial visibility and structural navigation.

The use of "fragments" also points to the empirical design of the study. Participants did not speak in abstract categories. Their expressions of political selfhood were grounded in specific, often localised, and sometimes contradictory experiences. The models presented in this chapter, Political Fear, Spiritual Isolation, Hybrid Identity, and others, are not endpoints, but provisional syntheses. They emerged through inductive coding and comparative reading of cases, from digital silence to religious retreat, from strategic volunteering to private dissent. These fragments were not intended to be unified into a singular narrative. Instead, they are arranged to reveal relational patterns, repetitions, and loops. What links them is not content, but structure. This is why the grammar metaphor is appropriate: grammar does not demand harmony; it provides conditions under which different forms can coexist, become legible, and produce meaning. What the framework has offered is not a theory of integration or resistance, but of modulation.

Integration theories tend to assume a trajectory, from separation to adaptation to acceptance. Resistance models, on the other hand, often read silence as dissent or treat withdrawal as subversion. But many of the practices described in this thesis are neither integrative nor resistant in a straightforward sense. They are contingent adjustments. A migrant who joins a UK-based political campaign while posting pro-China content in WeChat groups is not

necessarily conflicted; they may be managing multiple audiences under different rules of visibility. A participant who stops attending public forums after a racial incident is not withdrawing from politics; they may be preserving dignity and emotional energy. Modulation captures this—the act of tuning participation to structural tone. It accounts for variability, inconsistency, and recalibration over time.

The concept of modulation, proposed in Chapter 3, also allows us to engage more honestly with the emotional labour behind political presence. Migrants do not simply express opinions. They measure consequence. They anticipate misinterpretation. They navigate overlapping expectations from the host society, from transnational observers, and from their own families or communities. Modulation is thus not a soft concept; it is a precise term for understanding how identity and participation are constantly recalculated. In digital contexts, this is especially pronounced: one participant may forward political content without comment, another may silently observe, another may publicly speak but privately retract. These actions are not random. They are modulated expressions—tuned to perceived risk, audience, and platform logic.

The Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC) framework does not ask what kind of migrants participate, or how much. It shows under what conditions participation becomes bearable, and what forms it takes when fear, memory, and digital structures press in from all sides. This shift in framing is central to the theoretical contribution of the thesis. Most political behaviour models are output-oriented: they begin with identity or motivation and look for evidence of participation. MIPC reverses that. It begins with the structural conditions that make participation possible or dangerous, and then traces how migrants respond by rearranging parts of their identity. In this view, political agency is not the expression of self; it is the product of selective expression under constraint. This framework brings together the affective dimension of political fear (Scott, 1990), the institutional regulation of speech and space (Yuval-Davis, 2011), and the infrastructural pressure of digital visibility (Roberts, 2018), showing how they interact at the level of daily decisions.

The emphasis on conditions also opens the model to variation. Different migrants face different risks. A postgraduate student and a restaurant owner may experience digital exposure differently. A woman managing religious expectations and a man avoiding political talk at work may not act from the same motivations, but their practices may follow similar patterns of modulation. MIPC helps explain these patterns without collapsing differences. It is not a typology; it is a configuration—a map of how practice emerges from structure.

In this framework, participation is not simply behaviour. It is the residue of visibility—the trace left after identity strategies have been selectively activated, combined, or withdrawn in response to constraint. This definition matters because it reframes what counts as political. Much of the existing literature continues to treat participation as observable output: voting, protesting, signing petitions, and joining political parties. But for many of the migrants in this study, these are not accessible or meaningful forms. Participation is often what remains after political options have been filtered through fear, legality, language, or recognition. A WeChat post shared only within a private group; a refusal to vote explained as "not ready"; a quiet conversation about policy in a religious setting—these do not always register as political behaviour in surveys or civic reports. But they are participation redefined as what becomes possible after risk is calculated.

Residue is not just a metaphor; it signifies what's left behind—the trace, the conditional aspect. In discussions of digital authoritarianism (Tsourapas, 2018), emotional governance (Foucault, 1979), and platform surveillance (Roberts, 2018), residue highlights that full political expression is often unattainable. What remains partial, fragmented or symbolic still holds importance. It represents what occurs when individuals feel they cannot express everything but still choose to communicate something, somewhere, to someone. These forms should not be seen as failures of agency but as deliberate strategies.

Agency is not lost in this process; it is reconfigured, survives as calibration and symbolic positioning in spaces where misrecognition is always a risk. This reframing of agency is one of the thesis's central theoretical moves. The language of resistance often implies clarity— saying no, standing out, taking a position. But for these migrants, agency is often about staying safe, staying relevant, and staying unseen at the right moments. It is expressed through calibration: adjusting how much to say, when, and to whom. It is visible as an encrypted presence: the kind of political signal that is only legible to certain audiences, in certain registers. And it is symbolic positioning: how one locates oneself in relation to political norms without direct declaration.

Misrecognition, as Yuval-Davis (2011) reminds us, is not simply a risk of being misunderstood. It is also a mechanism of exclusion. To be visible in the wrong way, in the wrong place, can bring consequences. For many participants, misrecognition was not hypothetical—it was part of everyday life. One participant described being asked to speak for "the Chinese perspective" in a university setting, even when she did not hold those views. Another described being told

to "be grateful and stay quiet" in a civic organisation. In these cases, political silence is not apath, but a shield.

Throughout this chapter, three structural forces have been highlighted: the enduring memories of authoritarian socialisation, the influence of British institutional regulation, and the frameworks of digital platforms. These are not external pressures but internalised fields—spaces where identity is continuously negotiated, and participation shifts from a matter of choice to a matter of structure.

Authoritarian socialisation involves not only people's fears of authority or the system but also how they internalise these fears into their memories. Many participants explained that, during their time in China, they learnt to avoid politically sensitive topics and to distinguish personal failings in public expressions. Upon arriving in the UK, this internalised memory also affected their behaviour there. They recognise that surveillance persists through the diaspora community and digital platforms. Participant P6 (male, PhD Student), who chairs a Chinese association established by the Chinese embassy, explicitly mentioned that the embassy asked him to collect information on certain sensitive expressions. For ethical reasons, I will not provide further details, but this clearly indicates that surveillance is real. This socialisation can also lead them to distrust UK institutions, as they view authorities everywhere as unreliable.

British institutional regulation adds another layer. Multicultural recognition was often described as partial or conditional. Several participants expressed discomfort with how "diversity" was handled—sometimes celebrated in symbolic terms, but not always accompanied by political inclusion. Feeling "included but unheard," or "seen but not understood," was a common theme. Like Participant P5 said, she chose to "behave like a Chinese in cultural events to fulfil my colleagues' expectations." Participants often had to perform an expected version of integration—polite, grateful, apolitical—even when their actual experiences were more complex.

Digital platforms form the third part of the equation. Visibility in these spaces is not neutral; what people post online can be screenshotted, shared, misunderstood, or weaponised. These platforms do more than just facilitate expression. They shape it. Elements like feed design, opaque algorithms, and the unpredictability of the audience all foster a feeling of constant exposure. As a result, users adapted by posting less, forming private groups, avoiding

comments, or even quitting platforms entirely. Yet, even when withdrawn, they remained alert. Silence was seldom absolute; it was carefully curated.

And yet, the MIPC framework does not only apply to first-generation Chinese immigrants from mainland China. It holds explanatory potential for a wider range of contexts—especially migrants from other authoritarian regimes, or even digital citizens whose expression is shaped less by censorship than by affective exhaustion. The logic of modular adjustment, strategic withdrawal, and symbolic re-entry is not unique to this group. Migrants from other authoritarian regimes may share similar patterns: balancing political identities across borders, adapting to platform constraints, and navigating the emotional afterlife of repression. In a broader sense, digital citizens across the world now experience varying degrees of self-censorship, surveillance fatigue, and social performance from different tech-giants and governments simultaneously. The rise of online harassment, cancel culture, and reputational risk has made expression a calculated act for many. In this sense, MIPC can offer a language for describing how participation works when visibility becomes a form of vulnerability.

Whether second-generation migrants inherit this logic of modular negotiation remains an open question. Can political fears be maintained over generations? Can changes in the identity of first-generation mainland Chinese immigrants influence their offspring's behaviour? What are the functions of local Chinese associations or societies in moderating identity and political participation? There is still much for academic colleagues to do.

These questions matter not only for academic completeness but for future civic life. If younger generations inherit caution more than confidence, or if community organisations reinforce avoidance rather than expression, the long-term patterns of political engagement may remain fragmented. On the other hand, if modular logic becomes a source of flexibility—allowing migrants to speak across contexts, claim voice without seeking confrontation—it may open new possibilities for how we understand civic presence.

However, the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC) developed in this thesis is best understood as a framework rather than a fully formed theory. It operates at a meso-level of explanation, offering a situated grammar for understanding how identity and political participation are co-constituted under constraint. Its value lies not in predictive power or universal application, but in its ability to make visible the mechanisms—modular adjustment,

strategic withdrawal, symbolic re-entry—through which migrants navigate structural pressures across political, social, and digital fields.

The present study is based on a single temporal snapshot. Although Chapter 6 has shown in detail that different identity–participation regulatory models can coexist or shift over time within the same individual, the evidence here comes from cross-sectional interviews. Without longitudinal tracking, the durability, sequencing, and cumulative effects of these configurations remain an open question. The MIPC framework captures a moment in motion but is unable to track its long-term trajectories within the constraints of this dataset. This limitation is also an invitation. Future research, whether through extended temporal follow-up, cross-context comparison, or intergenerational study, could test the portability of MIPC beyond the PRC–UK corridor, refine its components, or reveal additional mechanisms. Migrants from other authoritarian regimes may share similar modular logics; equally, digital citizens outside migration contexts may experience analogous forms of expression compression and residue under platform governance or reputational risk. In this sense, MIPC should be treated as a generative framework rather than a closed system: a tool for analysing how political agency is configured when visibility is conditional, rather than a definitive theory of migrant political life.

In either case, the point of this chapter has not been to resolve contradictions, but to hold them together long enough for meaning to emerge. What we see in the strategies of these migrants is not indecision. It is deliberation. It is not confusion. It is care. And in that care, there is a political life worth taking seriously.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1 Revisiting the Research Questions and Theoretical Frame

This thesis was guided by four research questions. The first question, how first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants participate in politics in the UK, is addressed in Chapters 3, 6 and 7. Chapter 3 provides a conceptual dimension of participation specific to this group. Chapter 6 presents six empirically grounded models that describe how migrants participate selectively, symbolically, or actively. Chapter 7 further elaborates on these forms, arguing that participation is not the expression of stable civic identity, but often a response to constraint, surveillance, or ideological distance.

The second question, how migrants construct and position their identities across social and political domains, is answered primarily in Chapter 5. This chapter outlines identity formation strategies and, in Chapter 6, shows how identity influences political possibility in different ways. These identity positions are not fixed, but modular and situational. They are activated, combined, or hidden depending on context and perceived risk through or within political participation.

The third question, how participation and identity are mutually constituted, is resolved through the logic of dynamic co-construction in Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6 details how political engagement produces identity shifts, sometimes activating or creating entirely new positions. Chapter 7 systematises this process in the MIPC model.

The fourth question, how structural conditions mediate identity–participation relations, is answered in sections 7.3 and 7.4. These sections analyse digital visibility, the UK institutional governance, and authoritarian memory as structural fields that shape the identity-political participation co-construction for first-generation mainland Chinese migrants. Political engagement is shown to be deeply shaped by platform constraints, surveillance structures, and affective pressures inherited from both home and host country systems.

Three research aims listed in Chapter 1 also guided this research. The theoretical aim was to move beyond integrationist models and re-theorise participation as a strategic practice. This is fulfilled in Chapter 7.5 with the MIPC model, which explains participation as the residue of

identity adjustment under structural pressure. It is not a typology, nor a causal model, but a configurational practice framework. The empirical aim was to produce a situated, interpretive account of migrant political practice. This is achieved across Chapters 5 to 7 through detailed analysis and the integration of expression and integration aspects. Each chapter grounds participation in a lived context. The methodological aim was to develop a multi-modal, reflexive interpretivist design. This is implemented in Chapter 4 through the integration of in-depth interviews, visual methods, and reflexive thematic coding. These methods capture not only what migrants say, but how they manage expression, with attention to silence, gesture, and modulation.

Each research question is answered clearly through theoretically informed and empirically grounded chapters. Each aim is addressed through specific design choices and analytic practices. The result is a coherent and original contribution to the study of political participation, identity strategy, and structural constraint among first-generation migrants from Mainland China.

8.2 Summary of Findings and Contributions

Before summarising findings and contributions, it is necessary to relook the contexts. Contextualisation is always the key to interpretative research. Throughout the thesis, the three contextual fields identified in Chapter 1 that authoritarian socialisation, racialised British multiculturalism, and transnational digital platforms have been substantively and consistently engaged. Each has been examined not merely as background, but as an active field or space shaping the co-constitution of identity and political participation.

Authoritarian socialisation was explored in depth through participants' memories of political life in Mainland China, their attitudes toward authorities, their cautions, and their understandings of risk and safety (Chapters 5, 6, and 7.3). British multiculturalism was discussed in their ways of viewing their positionalities with both home society and established Chinese communities (Chapters 5 and 7.3). Digital platforms were analysed as both enabling and constraining arenas of expression, with platform architectures, audience preference, and transnational surveillance forming key mechanisms in the residue of visibility (Chapters 5, 6 and 7.4).

This thesis has shown that for first-generation migrants from Mainland China living in the UK, political life is shaped not just by past experiences with authoritarianism and ongoing fears of surveillance from the Chinese state. Just as importantly, it is also shaped by how British systems and politics structure everyday life. Policies like the hostile-environment measures and the "no recourse to public funds" (NRPF) regime, along with the way immigration enforcement has been pushed onto landlords, employers, and local councils, are not just background conditions. These mechanisms actively influence how migrants think about being seen, asserting their rights, and speaking out in the UK (Praxis, 2024; JCWI, 2024; Migration Observatory, 2024).

Since Brexit, things have become even more complex. The government's push to "take back control" of the borders, the introduction of a new points-based immigration system, and tough new policies like the New Plan for Immigration and the Illegal Migration Act have all created a climate where migrants' right to move, work, and even just exist in public spaces feels increasingly conditional – and heavily politicised (Institute for Government, 2019; HM Government, 2021; UK Parliament, 2023; International Rescue Committee, 2024).

For many of the people interviewed in this research, fears of being watched by the Chinese government blended with everyday concerns in the UK – like visa renewals, being turned away from welfare support, or being wrongly labelled as "illegal". This has created a unique kind of caution, shaped by both authoritarian memories and the realities of British immigration control. It is not a simple case of either/or – it's a hybrid system that is neither entirely authoritarian nor clearly liberal-democratic.

Understanding this dual influence is key to making sense of the different ways migrants relate to politics, identity, and participation – as explored in the empirical chapters. The patterns observed do not just come from internalising CCP-style discipline. They arise from the meeting point of past authoritarian experiences with present-day pressures: UK immigration rules, shrinking welfare access, and racialised narratives in public debate.

So the "culture of fear" that shapes how many Chinese migrants see their political possibilities is not just about China watching – it is also about how they are treated (or mistreated) by British systems. By putting British institutions at the centre of the analysis, not just treating them as a neutral background, this thesis pushes past the idea that Chinese authoritarianism is the only thing that matters. Instead, it shows that participation is something fragile and uncertain,

constantly negotiated under overlapping systems of control, marginal belonging, and unequal recognition in the post-Brexit UK. Taken together, these three contexts form an interlocking structure within which migrant agency is configured, demonstrating that identity–participation dynamics can only be understood by holding all three in simultaneous view.

Based on these, this thesis makes three contributions: empirical, theoretical, and methodological. Empirically, it shows that political participation among first-generation Mainland Chinese migrants in the UK does not follow the patterns assumed by conventional models. Participation is often selective, symbolic, delayed, or deliberately withheld. It can take the form of forwarding information without comment, withdrawing into religious or social spaces, or acting politically in one domain while remaining silent in another, etc. These patterns are not signs of political indifference. They are a product of fear, surveillance, and structural constraints. Active participation is not merely a symbol of integration; it also encompasses features of performance and structural adaptation. This study identifies four major identity strategies and empirically grounds them in interviews in Chapter 5. Moreover, the six identity-political participation co-constitutive models presented in Chapter 6 further organise these patterns into a conceptual map by. These provide future researchers with grounded terms and clear pathways to study constrained forms of political expression.

Empirical contribution also includes a critical response to the tendency in policy and academic work to treat Chinese migrants as politically absent or indifferent. This thesis argues that what appears as absence often masks forms of negotiation, affective regulation, or symbolic participation. The findings invite scholars to rethink what is being measured when we speak about political behaviour. They also raise implications for policy discussions about "hard-to-reach" migrant groups, showing that political silence may be rooted not in apathy but in a rational assessment of risk and recognition. This group requires more attention from both the government and academia.

Theoretically, the thesis introduces the Modular Identity–Participation Configuration (MIPC) approach. This is not a typology or a causal model. It is a framework that explains how participation emerges during the process of migrants configuring different identity elements—such as culture, religion, language, and political belief—under structural constraints. The MIPC framework identifies five mechanisms: identity nodes, constraint environments, modular combination, expression residue, and feedback repositioning. These explain how migrants respond to pressure, how they manage visibility, and how they adjust to what can be expressed.

The MIPC framework is grounded in the data rather than imposed from above. Each mechanism emerged through iterative thematic analysis and field-based comparison. Identity nodes refer to the different dimensions of self that migrants may activate—religion, language, political belief, gender, or professional role, etc. Structural constraints include platform legibility, legal uncertainty, and ideological mistrust, etc. Modular combination explains how these identity nodes are assembled and rearranged depending on context. Expression residue refers to the remaining visible behaviours after migrants have adjusted for risks or barriers. Feedback repositioning captures how these political behaviours in turn reshape identity and strategy.

This framework challenges dominant participation models that rely on linear assumptions. For example, it departs from Verba, Schlozman and Brady's (1995) resource-based civic voluntarism model by showing that having resources does not always translate to open participation. It also moves beyond integrationist assumptions by reframing participation as not the endpoint of civic belonging, but the outcome of a strategy within constraints. The model is flexible and transferable. It could be applied to other authoritarian-origin diaspora groups, to compare generational shifts in identity strategy, or to assess how platform change affects political self-presentation. It also provides a structured semantic system for recognising symbolic and low-visibility forms of engagement that are often dismissed or overlooked.

Methodologically, the thesis applies a reflexive and multi-modal qualitative approach that focuses on meaning interpretation. Through interviews, visual materials, and reflexive thematic analysis, the study captures how migrants describe what they do, and also how they navigate what they choose not to say. This design is particularly effective in studying constrained agency. For example, people are politically active but cautious, or emotionally engaged but institutionally invisible. The visual component was used not to collect image data for analysis, but as a tool for facilitation. Participants were invited to provide or comment on images that helped them reflect on their identity, experience, or emotion. This process proved extremely valuable in opening up sensitive themes and deepening the level of engagement during interviews. However, since images were not stored or analysed directly due to ethical requirements, the visual aspect remains partial. It did not reach the level of a fully developed visual ethnography. Future work could treat images not only as prompts, but as expressive acts that carry political meaning. For example, shared food images, religious symbols, or national flags in digital environments might be analysed as forms of soft signalling.

This research also accepts that interpretive inquiry does not necessarily offer objective truths. In this framework, the researcher is part of the analytic system. My own position—as someone with cultural proximity to the group but shaped by different academic and political expectations—was both an advantage and a limitation. I had access to conversations and expressions that may not have been available to an outsider, but I also carried biases in how I asked questions, heard answers, and understood silence. Interpretivism does not treat this as a flaw, but it does require ongoing reflexivity. This was addressed through memo writing, iterative reading, and attention to discomfort in both the field and the analysis.

In summary, rather than dictating what migrants ought to do, this study draws attention to what they are already doing—quietly, carefully, and in contexts they cannot wholly shape.

8.3 Limitations, Final Reflection, and Future Directions

This research has several limitations. The sample is limited. Due to the snowball sampling and my own personal network. The distribution of the sample's gender, age, and backgrounds was not as diversified as an ideal representative sample taken from the first-generation Chinese migrant population in the UK. The participants were recruited through community networks and online platforms, which means that the study may over-represent those who are more socially connected or more willing to speak. The findings are not generalisable in a statistical sense, but they offer patterns and mechanisms that may be observed in similar contexts.

The researcher's own positionality is also a source of limitation. As an insider to the group being studied, but also a researcher trained in Western academic norms, I occupy a position that is both embedded and interpretive. I brought with me certain assumptions and ways of reading meaning that shaped the entire research process—from how I asked questions to how I understood the silences. In an interpretivist framework, the researcher is not outside the analysis. I am part of it. There is no neutral ground. My subjectivity is a resource, but also a constraint, and this thesis does not pretend to remove it.

There are also limitations in the method. Although this is a multi-modal study, the use of visual material is partial. Images were not saved, archived, or analysed independently. They were used only as elicitation tools to facilitate conversation. That function was valuable—many participants spoke more openly when prompted by an image they chose or described. It made the interviews deeper, more reflective, and more emotionally grounded. But the visual

dimension could have gone further. Future work could analyse images more systematically, include participant commentary on visual data, or explore how digital images circulate as political expressions within migrant networks. Or even the aesthetic performance of these immigrants could generate more materials to interpret. However, ethical and safety consideration remains a priority for politically sensitive research subjects.

Another limitation concerns temporal depth. In most cases, I was only able to conduct a single interview with each participant, and so I lack the perspective that repeat interviews over time would have provided. The transformations that participants reported—shifts in identity, changes in political participation strategies—were captured at one moment, but might look quite different one, two, or five years later as the life course unfolds and as political, personal, and digital environments change. This temporal constraint inevitably limits the capacity to trace how identity–participation configurations evolve. However, I believe these limitations do not undermine the value of employing these research methods. Rather, they highlight the space for future studies to build longitudinally, visually, and comparatively on the groundwork established here.

Finally, this is an interpretivist study. The aim was never to measure or prove, but to understand how meaning is made under pressure. That means the analysis is necessarily subjective. It reflects one reading, shaped by one researcher, within one set of constraints. But it also opens space for other readings, and for further work that may follow, respond, or contradict. That is part of the interpretive process. The research accounts provided in the foregoing chapters make no claim to speak for everyone. But it does represent a critical and theoretically informed attempt to pay attention to a small group of people who are invisible or even invisible within an invisible group. For them, identity is unclear and complicated; they are navigating themselves through different dimensions and constraints. For them, political participation is not a natural-born right, but something they have to make a precise decision to mitigate risks and pressures.

There are many directions future work could take. The MIPC model could be applied to other authoritarian-origin migrant groups or used to compare first-generation with second-generation strategies. It would also be valuable to explore how platform changes, such as algorithm transparency or shifts in content governance, affect migrant identity expression.

More importantly, I must reaffirm that authoritarianism is a typical and dominant political framework used by Western academia. As a researcher trained in this system, I could not find another way to challenge this framework in this thesis. Therefore, I continue to use the authoritarian legacies as a starting point for my research. However, Chinese politics is very complex; socialisation under the Chinese political system cannot be simplified to authoritarian socialisation alone. Various historical and cultural factors, along with people's understanding of political meritocracy and legitimacy, significantly enhance the quality of research on immigrants from Mainland China. As a PhD student researching first-generation mainland Chinese migrants, I lack the ability or resources to create a new framework for analysis. Nevertheless, I sincerely hope that in the future, scholars can move beyond the assumption of authoritarianism to foster better research regarding this group.

This thesis ends without closure. The people I spoke to are still adjusting, still negotiating, still moving between silence and speech. Their stories are not finished. This framework was one way to understand them, not the only one. But I hope it allows others to see their actions not as confusion, not as contradiction, but as what they are: serious and meaningful responses to difficult conditions.

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Appendix A – AI-Generated Photos used in Photo Elicitation

Prompts used to produce these pictures: 10/03/2024 and 22/03/2024 by ChatGPT-3.5
These pictures are not part of this thesis, but only tools for facilitating interviews.

1. Voting in elections — "Draw a scene of voting, with political parties, countries, and any other political background blurred or removed. The setting includes a generic flag-like banner (not identifiable to any nation), and depicts people casting their ballots in a neutral polling station."

2. Involvement in formal political roles — "Draw a scene showing involvement in formal political roles such as holding public office or serving on governmental committees and councils. Remove all national background elements."

3. Leading community organisations — "Draw a scene of leading community organisations, managing community resources, or spearheading local development projects, with no identifiable national or political symbols."

4. Organising grassroots movements — "Draw a scene of organising grassroots movements, direct action, and legal advocacy to influence policy and bring about social change, without identifiable national background."

5. Running social enterprises — "Draw a scene of starting and running social enterprises or organisations aimed at addressing political, social, or environmental issues, with all political or national identifiers removed."

6. Participating in protests — "Draw a scene of protesting or participating in social movements (not leading them), ensuring no identifiable national flags or symbols are visible."

7. Attending party activities — "Draw a scene of attending party activities such as fundraising, clerical work, rallies, etc., without any visible flags or identifiable party logos."

8. Contacting/lobbying — "Draw a scene of contacting/lobbying different government agencies, public media, Members of Parliament, and key opinion leaders (KOLs), with emphasis on the act of contacting, not on political symbols."

9. Boycotting and ethical consumption — "Draw a scene of boycotting, ethical consumption, eco-friendly purchasing, and corporate advocacy, without national or political identifiers."

10. Political party membership — "Draw a scene of being a member of a legal, political party or organisation, with no identifiable party or national symbols."

11. Attending hearings and petitions — "Draw a scene of attending public hearings, authority-led discussions, expressing/posting political opinions or satires in public, and signing petitions, with no identifiable political or national markers."

Voting

Political Representation

Community Leadership and Management

Activism and Advocacy: Organizing grassroots movements, direct action, and legal advocacy to influence policy and bring about social change.

Entrepreneurial Initiatives: Starting and running social enterprises or organizations aimed at addressing political, social, or environmental issues.

Social Movements: Protesting or participating in social movements.

Party Campaigning: Attending party activities: fund raising, clerical work, rally, etc.

Contacting: Contacting/lobbying different government agencies, public media, MPs and KOLs.
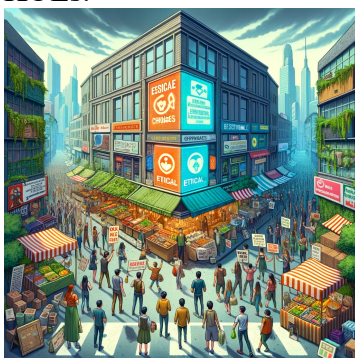
Political Consumerism: Boycotting, Ethical Consumption, Eco-friendly Purchasing, Corporate Advocacy, etc.

Political/public organization: Being a member of a legal, political party or organization

Expression: Attending public hearings, attending authority-led discussions, expressing/posting political opinions/satires in public, signing petitions.

Appendix B1 Core Codes Summary

Code Name	Definition	Example Quote
Cultural Retention	Instances where participants maintain cultural practices or traditions in the host society.	We celebrate the Lunar New Year every year, even here in London. It's important for us to keep this alive. (P19)
Media Preference	Use of specific media as a way to maintain cultural ties or familiarity.	I only use Chinese social media. It helps me stay connected to what's happening back home. (P17)
Occupational Identity	Statements reflecting a sense of identity linked to one's profession or work.	Being a farmer here is my way of contributing and being recognized in society. (P23)
Family Obligation	Expressions related to responsibilities towards family members.	I have to be role model for my child. I hope she can be accepted by this society and be proud of me. (P26)
Resistance to Assimilation	Actions or attitudes reflecting a reluctance to fully adopt the host culture.	I prefer to stay within the Chinese community because I feel I don't need to conform to British norms. (P37)
Regional Identity	References to sub-national or regional affiliation within China as a form of identity expression.	I'm from the north-eastern China. I am always a big part of how I think about myself. (P19)
Language Maintenance	Deliberate efforts to retain or pass on native language skills.	I only speak Mandarin with my children at home. Even my husband who is a British also learn Chinese. (P33)
Cultural Transmission	Teaching or sharing original cultural knowledge with the next generation.	I try to make sure my kids know the stories behind every festival. (P28)
Diasporic Belonging	Feeling a sense of collective identity with other Chinese migrants.	Even if we come from different parts of China, we understand each other in ways others can know. (P11)
Instrumental Integration	Integration practices adopted for pragmatic, not emotional or identity reasons.	I joined the student union election mainly because it helps with my job application. (P10)
UK Civic Identity	Identifying with British civic structures without full cultural assimilation.	I vote here and pay taxes. That's enough to make me feel part of it. (P4)
Bystander Identity	Describing oneself as a passive observer in British society.	I just live here. I don't get involved with any of the bigger stuff. (P2)
Tourist Identity	Seeing one's presence in the UK as temporary or peripheral.	I never planned to stay; it was always just for the degree. (P3)
Linguistic Ambivalence	Expressing discomfort or alienation due to language limitations.	Sometimes I pretend to understand at meetings, just to avoid embarrassment. (P21)
Code Switching	Strategic adjustment of behaviour or language in different settings.	At work, I try to sound more British. But at home, I'm just myself. Sometimes I perform as a Chinese to meet my colleagues' stereotype. (P5)

Self-Distancing	Avoiding full identification with either host or origin culture.	I don't feel fully Chinese anymore, but I'm not British either. I want to be a joker. (P8)
Generational Tension	Conflicts between migrants and their children over cultural values.	My two children keep asking me whether they are Scottish, British or Chinese. I feel too hard to response. (P16)
Class Dislocation	Struggles with downward mobility or mismatch between old and new status.	Back in China, I was respected. Here, I feel invisible. (P30)
Silent Identity	Choosing not to articulate identity publicly due to uncertainty or risk.	I just keep my thoughts to myself. No need to stir anything. (P37)
Aspirational Identity	Articulating identity in terms of future goals or imagined belonging.	One day I want to feel like I truly belong here. (P23)
Gendered Identity	Identity shaped by gender roles in migration or host society.	As a woman, I always feel judged in both cultures. (P1)
Faith-Based Identity	Using religious frameworks as a foundation of selfhood.	Church gives me stability. It's where I feel most at ease. (P24)
Intersectional Identity	Navigating multiple social locations (race, gender, class, etc.).	It's not just being Chinese. It's also being a woman in academia. (P7)
Strategic Silence	Choosing non-disclosure of identity as a protective measure.	There are things I could say, but I don't think I should. (P24)
Cultural Pride	Affirming one's culture (subcultures) openly and positively.	I am proud of my gay identity. I feel free in the UK to show my identity. No one here will see me as a troublemaker. (P34)
Hostility to Origin	Expressing rejection or disillusionment with China.	I don't want anything to do with that system anymore. (P13)
Performative Britishness	Actively displaying British traits as a strategy for inclusion.	I make sure to talk about the British culture, it helps me fit in. I am actually a spiritual British. (P5)
Contested Belonging	Feeling challenged or rejected when asserting belonging.	Even with a British passport, people still ask where I'm really from. (P39)
Ambivalent Citizenship	Holding citizenship without emotional attachment.	I have the passport, but I'm not sure I feel British. I even cannot speak a fluent English. (P40)
Professional Legitimacy	Gaining recognition through skilled labour or career achievements.	At least in my job, they see me as competent. (P27)
Loyalty to Diaspora	Prioritising diasporic Chinese communities over integration.	I mostly spend time with Chinese people. It's easier. (P36)
Emotional Withdrawal	Detaching emotionally from identity debates.	I just don't think about it anymore. It is not important. I am just a human being. (P2)
Narrative Disruption	Struggling to produce a consistent identity story.	Sometimes I don't know who I am, even when I try to explain. (P9)
Moral Alignment	Defining identity through value systems rather than culture.	What matters is kindness, not where you come from. (P24)

Digital anonymised Political Engagement	Discussing politics in private digital spaces (e.g., WhatsApp).	I don't talk about politics in public, but in private groups, we discuss a lot. But only in WhatsApp. WeChat is not safe. (P4)
Cautious Public Presence	Self-censoring political views in public or professional settings.	I never post political views online; it's not worth the trouble even in the UK. (P12)
Selective Activism	Engaging in specific issue-based or belief-based activism while avoiding broader political involvement.	I support visa reforms but not party politics. I only care something related to myself. (P11)
Symbolic Nationalism	Expressing national pride through cultural or economic actions rather than political engagement.	I support Chinese cultures. I celebrate Chinese New Year with my British friends in London. However, I do not want to express my political stand with the CCP. It is unnecessary. (P2)
Digital Liminality	Online spaces serve as a buffer between engagement and disengagement.	I follow Chinese politics, but I don't comment. (P37)
Strategic Withdrawal	Avoiding political discourse entirely as a self-protection strategy.	It's safer to stay out of politics. (P 30)
Economic Political Expression	Using consumption patterns (e.g., boycotts) as a form of political expression.	I only buy from brands that align with my animal welfare. (P27)
Religious-Driven Political Abstention	Avoiding secular political engagement due to religious identity.	I only follow moral teachings, not politics.(P33)
Voting Reluctance	Avoiding voting due to a lack of understanding or perceived inefficacy.	I don't vote because I don't think it changes anything. (P40)
WeChat Political Discourse	Engaging in political discussions primarily in closed Chinese-language social media groups.	Most of my discussions about the UK Politics happen on WeChat. (P35)
Transnational Political Fear	Avoiding political topics due to concerns about surveillance or repercussions.	I don't say anything negative about China, just in case. I still have to go back to visit my family.(P39)
Community-Based Political Action	Participating in local diaspora organizations but avoiding national politics.	I help organize cultural events, but I don't see that as political. (P6)
Petition-Based Engagement	Engaging in policy-related activism without broader political participation.	I signed a petition about student visas before, but that's all. (P14)
Instrumental Political Participation	Engaging in politics only when directly affecting personal interests.	I care about tax policies because they affect my business. (P37)

Issue-Based Protest Participation	Attending protests for specific causes but avoiding political alignment.	I joined the anti-racism march, but I don't identify with any party. It is an attitude instead of political affiliation. (P1)
Social Movement Engagement	Supporting grassroots movements without electoral participation.	I donate to community organizations, and to support local green movements but I don't vote. Voting is useless. (P16)
Digital Advocacy	Sharing political content online but avoiding in-person activism.	I post about important issues via podcast, but I won't go to protests especially as I still do not have citizenship. (P34)

Appendix B2A Identity Themes

Theme	Subcategories	Included Codes (Examples)	Description
Cultural Identities	Chinese (Culturally), Chinese (Culturally/Active), Chinese (Culturally/Passive), Regional Identities	Cultural Retention, Media Preference, Regional Identity, Cultural Transmission	Participants' maintenance and negotiation of cultural heritage in the UK context.
National and Civic Identities	Chinese (Socially-Politically/Active), Chinese (Socially-Politically/Passive), UK Citizen, UK Resident	UK Civic Identity, Performative Britishness, Diasporic Belonging	Negotiation of national belonging and civic engagement through formal affiliations either with the UK or China.
Social Identities	Family Identity, Professional and Occupational Identity, Gender Identity, Class Identity, Outsider Identities	Occupational Identity, Family Obligations, Gendered Identity, Self-Distancing, Bystander Identity, Tourist Identities	Roles and positionalities within host society that shape perceived belonging.
Intersectional and Values-Driven Identities	Marginalized Identity, Intersectional Identity, Values-Driven Identity	Religious Identity, Faith-Based Identity, Intersectional Identity	Identities shaped by overlapping categories and ideological values.

Appendix B2B Political Participation Themes

Theme	Category	Codes (Example)	Description
Participation as Legibility	Electoral and Civic Acts，Institutional Recognition and Political Legibility	Petition-Based Engagement，Instrumental Political Participation, Social Movement Engagement	This theme reflects direct forms of political participation through voting, local governance, and official civic involvement. Participants typically link engagement to their citizenship or residency status.
Digital Drift and Conditional Voice	Platform-Based Interaction，Digital Field as Selective and Mediated Space	WeChat-Based Political Discourse, Digital Liminality, Digital Advocacy，Digital anonymised Political Engagement	This theme captures digitally mediated political engagement, often within private or semi-private networks. The emphasis is on caution, selective visibility, and platform-based activism.
Participation as Conditional Risk	Issue-Based and Contextual Actions, Strategic and Situated Engagement	Issue-Based Protest Participation, Selective Activism, Cautious Public Presence	Participants engage in specific causes while avoiding ideological or systemic commitments. Engagement is strategic and often constrained by perceived risks or priorities.
Refusal, Silence, and Protective Withdrawal	Self-Protection and Withdrawal, Absence as Political Act	Symbolic Nationalism, Voting Reluctance, Transnational Political Fear, Strategic Withdrawal	This theme highlights deliberate disengagement from politics, often motivated by fear, mistrust, or disillusionment. Silence and

Symbolic, Economic, and Ethical Alignments	Symbolic and Moral-Based Acts, Mobilising Political Meaning Beyond Institutions	Religious-Driven Political Abstention, Symbolic Nationalism, Selective Activism	withdrawal function as strategic acts.
			This theme captures political meaning expressed through values, symbols, consumption, or belief systems.

Appendix C Memo Examples

Memo Title	Date / Round	Data Source / Participant	Description / Observation	Reflexive Note / Decision Made
The tensions between Evangelicalism and the Church of England	2025.02 / Coding Round 2	P24 Interview Transcript	the participant expressed strong affiliation with the Church of England and denying the legitimacy of other churches，especially evangelicalism	This code might be meaningful to investigate how religions moderate the first-generation mainland Chinese decisions towards religious life however the participant 24 is the only participant from the Church of England his own attitudes is not representative and his sentiment towards other churches cannot be expanded into any theoretical explanation might only be a personal choice and I am not an expert of religion so to be cautious I decided to delete this code.
Name of Symbolic, Economic, and Ethical Alignments	2025.05 / Coding Round 3	Participant 1	It is very hard decided to name this same as the belief of value based political participation or the symbolic economic and ethical alignments.	After revisiting the participant transcript of participant 1, I feel that some belief based or value based political participation can be quite complicated as the participant one mentioned several times about she sees herself as an intellectual feminist so she chose to only participate in ethnic minority feminist group gathering. However she also mentioned that she used to join the university's feminist group which is dominated by white people. I understand that in different contexts, people's choice can be limited. Sometimes to transfer belief to action is not simple. So sometimes actions of an individual can be symbolic or partially reflect his or her beliefs. So I choose the word symbolic instead of the belief or value based description.
Political Fear Model	2025.02 / Coding Round 2	N/A	The political fear model does not have a process of participation but when people experience fear it does mean they're in	I carefully revisit descriptions from various participants. I feel that yes it is the case. There are many participants who even do not have the courage to participate in politics. However political participation for them is not

			danger and so they close their boundary or initiative for political participation immediately. Should I separate into a model III or keep it in Model II?	something intangible. They have their own understandings and feelings of political participation so they can recognise risks. To keep it simple is very important. A too complicated model will just confuse audiences and make less of a contribution to this field. So I decided to keep this model in model II. And in analytical chapters I will go on to explain clearly why emergent political participation can lead to the closure of identity.
Performance or valuable data	2024.11 / Coding Round 1	P26 Interview Transcript/Photos	The participant constantly shows his achievement in different tournaments and described himself as a representative and glory for the Chinese community in the UK. He asked me to include his name in my paper and encouraged me to go to Oxbridge for further studies because a voice from there will bring more power to British Chinese community.	I revisited the memo I wrote on that day. I wrote that this participant gave me a very strange feeling it seems like I'm not a researcher but a journalist he tried to show something to me and ask me to disseminate his achievement to others. I feel some parts of his expressions are performance. And he has a very clear party affiliation. So, I decided to be extremely cautious about that transcript and decided to only use part of his expressions focused on his relationship with his family but not to talk about his party affiliation and political attitudes.
Contradiction	2024.11 / Coding Round 1	P37 Interview Transcript	participant 37 put forward contradictory descriptions towards the same issue	Participant 37 initially criticised the business environment in China. And expressed the feeling that she chose to come to the UK not only for her husband but also for business opportunities. However, during the semi-structured interview she emphasised that her husband is the only reason for her to be in the UK. I fully understand that people's feeling towards something can be very complicated and as a researcher I do not want to diminish my participants by pointing this out. I therefore categorised these two statements as invalid.

Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Outline

Note: A semi-structured interview is used as a supplementary method. Base on the quality of the visual interview part, not all questions will be asked during the interview.

1. Background and Migration Experience

(1) Can you tell me a bit about your background before coming to the UK?

(2) What were the primary reasons for your migration to the UK?

(3) Describe your initial experiences when you first arrived in the UK.

2. Identity Perception and Representation

(1) How would you primarily identify yourself now? What factors or experiences have contributed to this self-identification?

(2) How has living in the UK influenced or changed your perception of your own identity? Are there specific events or interactions that stand out in this regard?

(3) Do you feel that your identity shifts depending on the context or people you're with? For instance, do you identify differently when you're with family, at work, or in social settings?

(4) Do you feel that there are distinct differences between your private (at home) and public (outside, at work, with friends) identities? Can you provide instances where you felt a stark contrast between the two?

(5) Have you ever felt pressured to present or alter your identity in certain ways to fit into British society or to be accepted? How did you navigate these pressures?

(6) How do you feel about the portrayal and representation of Chinese or Chinese-British individuals in UK media, politics, or popular culture? Are there representations that you find particularly accurate or inaccurate?

(7) Are there any community events, festivals, or traditions you participate in the UK that are significant to your Chinese heritage? How do these events impact or resonate with your sense of identity?

(8) Do you feel that you juggle multiple identities? For instance, do you ever feel that you need to "switch" between being xxx and xxx in different contexts? If so, can you describe what prompts these switches and how they feel?

(9) Are there personal stories or narratives you lean on to explain or understand your identity as both xxx and xxx? How have these narratives evolved over time?

(10) Are there ever moments when your identities come into conflict? How do you reconcile or navigate these moments?

3. Political Participation

(1) How do you perceive your identity (Chinese, British, Chinese-British, or something else) influencing your political views or actions in the UK?

(2) Do you think that political participation or engagement is different for Chinese migrants than for other ethnic groups in the UK? If yes, how?

(3) Have your experiences as a Chinese migrant shaped your political beliefs or ideologies in any way? Could you provide any specific instances?

(4) Do you feel more drawn to a particular political party or movement in the UK because of your cultural or migrant background? Why or why not?

(5) How do you perceive the representation of Chinese migrants in the UK political system? Does this influence your willingness to engage in political activities?

(6) Are there certain barriers or incentives, grounded in your identity, that impact your political participation in the UK?

(7) How does the Chinese community in the UK, if at all, influence your political decisions or actions? Are there specific community leaders, events, or narratives that have made a significant impact?

(8) How do you envision the future of political participation for Chinese migrants in the UK? What role does identity play in shaping this future?

4. Closing

(1) Thank the participant for their time and insights.

(2) Inform them of the next steps in the research process and how their information will be used.

(3) Provide them with contact information in case they have further questions or wish to withdraw their data.