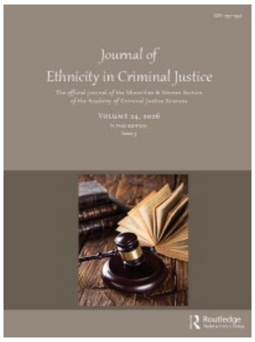

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Organizing illicit and informal livelihoods: Chinese immigrants and economic networks in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how Chinese immigrants in the UK engage in illicit and informal livelihood strategies under legal precarity and labor-market exclusion. Drawing on 70 semi-structured interviews with documented and undocumented immigrants, this study analyzes cannabis distribution, massage parlors, and informal currency exchange. The findings reveal differentiated roles and organizational functions rather than cohesive organized-crime structures. The participants are embedded in migrant networks with internal labor divisions. Undocumented immigrants occupy precarious, labor-intensive roles, whereas documented immigrants control more resources and organizational functions. This study reframes illicit economic participation as a structured response shaped by exclusion, hierarchy, ethnicized criminalization, and victim–offender overlap.

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Research on Chinese immigrants and crime in the United Kingdom (UK) is often viewed through organized crime perspectives, particularly triad-based models developed in earlier work (Silverstone, 2011; Whittle & Silverstone, 2024). These models typically interpret crimes conducted by Chinese immigrants as being organized through hierarchical and ethnically constrained organizations that originate in Hong Kong triad societies and are characterized by headquarters and sub-branch structures, territory-based influence, and involvement in diverse illegal businesses, such as illicit drugs, smuggling, and prostitution, hidden behind legitimate business fronts (Wang & Kwok, 2023). However, this focus is increasingly insufficient for explaining contemporary migrant economic activities, which are often fragmented and embedded into daily practices (Latham-Sprinkle et al., 2019).

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Studies on ethnicity and criminal justice have shown that beyond being represented by patterns of offending, minority groups are shaped by policing practices, racialized suspicion, and differential treatment within the criminal justice system (Veiga et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent evidence from England and Wales suggests that ethnic disparities in sentencing persist even after controlling for legally relevant factors, indicating that unequal criminal justice outcomes cannot be fully explained by offense characteristics (Lymperopoulou, 2024). Thus, Chinese immigrants should not be perceived solely through organized crime frameworks; they should be viewed as a migrant population whose economic practices are interpreted and regulated through legal precarity and ethnicized criminalization.

As UK immigration policies become more restrictive (Luo et al., 2023; Nehring & Sealey, 2020), undocumented and low-skilled immigrants face increasing barriers to securing a stable legal status and sustaining their livelihoods (Åhlberg & Granada, 2022; Akhtar, 2020). With legal employment largely restricted to documented immigrants and inaccessible to undocumented immigrants, some individuals turn to high-risk or illicit activities as alternative income sources, often with the intention of eventually returning to their countries of origin (Åhlberg & Granada, 2022; Liu, 2021). These conditions are economic and regulatory, and they affect which migrant practices become visible, suspicious, and potentially subject to criminalization.

Recent scholarship on the informal economy suggests that these practices should not be understood as marginal or exceptional but as structurally embedded components of contemporary labor markets, particularly under conditions of regulatory constraint and exclusion (Chen, 2023). The informal economy itself is internally stratified, with differentiated roles, levels of risk, and access to resources among participants. This perspective provides a broader analytical framework for understanding migrant participation in informal and illicit economic activities, beyond case-specific explanations.

Criminological research has increasingly highlighted the fluid boundaries between victimization and offending. The concept of the victim–offender overlap highlights that individuals may simultaneously occupy or move between victim and offender positions, which are shaped by structural constraints and dynamic processes rather than fixed identities (Kahlmeter, 2023; Wang, 2024). These perspectives challenge binary distinctions between perpetrators and victims, emphasizing the complex and shifting positionalities of individuals within illicit economic systems. Furthermore, they resonate with broader critiques in criminology that question the tendency to construct minority groups as fixed "others" and call for attention to diversity, fluid identities, and the social production of difference (Hudson, 2008; Manzur et al., 2024).

Public and policy perceptions of undocumented Chinese migration in the UK have been shaped by highly publicized events. Examples include the 2000 Dover tragedy, in which 58 Chinese migrants suffocated inside a lorry while attempting clandestine entry into the UK, and the 2004 Morecambe Bay disaster, in which 23 Chinese migrants drowned while picking cockles at night. These tragedies were watershed moments in the UK–China illegal migration agenda and shaped media and policy narratives surrounding snakehead smuggling networks and organized crime (Whittle, 2022). These events reinforce associations between Chinese migration, irregularity, and organized crime in law enforcement and the public discourse (Tilley, 2020; Whittle & Silverstone, 2024; Yang, 2022). Moreover, restrictive immigration and labor regimes may lead undocumented immigrants into precarious and unregulated work, including informal and illicit economic activities (Luo, 2021; Luo et al., 2023).

Research on Chinese migrant involvement in illicit activities has paid limited attention to the organization of these practices and their role in migrant settlement. It has been criticized for over-relying on law enforcement perspectives that obscure migrants' agency and differentiated experiences (Latham-Sprinkle et al., 2019; Whittle & Silverstone, 2024). Earlier research focused on cigarette smuggling and counterfeit DVD trading (Silverstone, 2011). Recent evidence indicates a shift toward activities such as cannabis cultivation and distribution, commercial sexual services in massage parlors, and informal currency exchange between the British pound (GBP) and renminbi (RMB, official currency of the People's Republic of China; Shi, 2021; Westmore, 2025; Whittle & Silverstone, 2024). Informal currency exchange has received little scholarly attention despite its growing prevalence within migrant communities. Furthermore, existing research has rarely examined the internal organization, conflicts, and risks associated with these activities. In this study, internal organization refers to the division of labor, role allocation, and hierarchical relationships in migrant economic networks. Conversely, conflicts and risks refer to the participants' experiences of robbery, fraud, police intervention, exploitation, and other forms of vulnerability.

Therefore, this study examines three forms of illicit and informal economic activity: cannabis cultivation and distribution, commercial sexual services in massage parlors, and informal currency exchange. The analysis focuses on participants' sociodemographic characteristics, the organizational structures of these activities, and the risks experienced by those involved. This study investigates the effects of legal and economic exclusion, ethnicized criminalization, migrant legal precarity, and unequal access to criminal justice protection on illicit and informal livelihood strategies among documented and undocumented Chinese immigrants (DCIs/UCIs). Rather than focusing on organized crime structures, it investigates how migrant economic activities are shaped by exclusion from formal labor markets and structured through differentiated roles, internal hierarchies, and status-based inequalities within migrant networks.

This study poses the following research questions: What types of illicit livelihood strategies do Chinese immigrants in the UK adopt? How are these activities organized within migrant networks? What risks and vulnerabilities shape migrant participation in informal economic activities?

Building on recent scholarship on informal economies and the victim–offender overlap, this study conceptualizes illicit livelihood strategies among Chinese immigrants as structured, stratified, and dynamic forms of economic participation shaped by legal status, resource inequality, and institutional exclusion. Rather than focusing solely on the types of activities immigrants engage in, the analysis examines the internal organization of these activities, highlighting differentiated roles, status-based inequalities, and divisions of labor within migrant networks. It explores how individuals navigate the blurred boundaries between legality and illegality, agency and constraint, and victimization and participation, challenging interpretations that reduce these practices to either cohesive organized crime structures or purely exploitative conditions.

This study contributes to research on migration, ethnicity, and criminal justice and has implications for policing and immigration policy. First, it challenges dominant representations of Chinese immigrants as forming cohesive, organized criminal groups by demonstrating that their participation in illicit economies is fragmented, sector-specific, and embedded within broader multi-ethnic networks. Second, it highlights the internal organization of these economic activities, showing how differentiated roles, status-based inequalities, and divisions of labor structure migrant participation across sectors. Third, it advances understanding of the victim–offender overlap by illustrating how individuals may simultaneously occupy positions of vulnerability and participation, navigating shifting boundaries between exploitation, agency, and participation within informal economic systems.

Materials and methods

Research design

This study employs a qualitative case study design. Case study methods are particularly suitable for investigating complex, underexplored phenomena in real-world contexts, enabling an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source, supplemented by a short questionnaire, enabling participants to describe their migration experiences, income-generating strategies, and daily lives in detail while ensuring alignment with the core research themes (Adeoye-Olatunde &

Olenik, 2021). All interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English by the corresponding author. Translation focused on preserving the meaning and contextual nuances and was cross-checked during analysis. The English transcripts were used for subsequent analysis.

Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained from the relevant institutional review board and all participants, respectively. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited through a structured intermediary process designed to protect anonymity and enhance psychological safety, particularly for UCIs facing heightened legal risks. Direct recruitment by the researchers was avoided to minimize the risk of identity exposure. Instead, trusted intermediaries, comprising Chinese business owners, immigration advisors, Chinese-speaking employment agents, and law firms specializing in immigration, facilitated participant recruitment. These intermediaries contacted potential participants within their networks and identified individuals who met the inclusion criteria.

For undocumented immigrants, eligibility criteria included being a Chinese national aged 20–55 years, residing or working in the UK without legal immigration status, and being able to communicate independently. Documented immigrants had similar criteria, except that a legal residency status was required. To protect privacy, intermediaries did not disclose participants' identities to the researcher.

Participants created dedicated WeChat accounts solely for anonymous communication with the research team. These accounts were used to conduct one-to-one Voice over Internet Protocol interviews, ensuring that no identifying information was exchanged or recorded. In some cases, participants affiliated with legal firms preferred face-to-face interviews, which were conducted in secure meeting rooms. Participation remained voluntary throughout, and participants could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Data collection and analysis

Participants completed a short questionnaire (approximately 3 min) to collect basic demographic and socioeconomic information. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews, which lasted 40–80 min, were conducted. We interviewed 70 participants, comprising equal numbers of DCIs and UCIs, thereby enabling comparison between the groups. Data collection continued

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Variable	DCIs ($N = 35$)	UCIs ($N = 35$)
Age (years)		
<20	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
20–30	10 (28.6%)	7 (20%)
31–40	8 (22.9%)	13 (37.1%)
41–50	11 (31.4%)	12 (34.3%)
>51	6 (17.1%)	3 (8.6%)
Gender		
Men	17 (48.6%)	19 (54.3%)
Women	18 (51.4%)	16 (45.7%)
Immigration duration (years)		
<5	3 (8.6%)	8 (22.9%)
5–10	6 (17.1%)	11 (31.4%)
11–15	10 (28.6%)	8 (22.9%)
16–20	8 (22.9%)	6 (17.1%)
>20	8 (22.9%)	2 (5.7%)

until thematic saturation was reached, with no substantially new themes emerging. The participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

The interviews explored participants' migration trajectories, livelihood strategies, social networks, living conditions, emotional responses, and perceived barriers to integration. Participants were reminded that they could skip questions, pause, or terminate the interview at any time. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent.

This study employed an applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011), as it provided a flexible systematic framework to identify recurrent patterns across rich qualitative interview data while maintaining analytic transparency. This approach was particularly appropriate for this study because it enabled a comparison of documented and undocumented immigrants' experiences across various livelihood sectors while remaining grounded in the participants' accounts. Following transcription, the analysis proceeded in six stages. First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to facilitate familiarization with the participants' narratives and cross-check the translated materials. Second, open coding was conducted using NVivo to identify recurrent concepts and patterns that emerged from the data. Although coding was primarily inductive, it was also informed by the research questions. Third, related codes were grouped into broader candidate themes. This process identified three recurrent livelihood sectors: cannabis distribution, massage parlors, and informal currency exchange. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined by focusing on similarities, differences, and atypical cases to avoid overgeneralization. Fifth, themes were defined and named to reflect recurring patterns in the participants' experiences and livelihood strategies. Finally, the themes were used to organize the presentation of the findings and address the research questions, thereby ensuring that the interpretation remained grounded in the participants' accounts.

Themes were systematically reviewed across DCIs and UCIs to identify similarities and differences in role allocation, access to resources, and forms of vulnerability. Contradictory or atypical cases were given attention to ensure that dominant patterns were not overgeneralized. Considering the use of intermediary-based recruitment, participants were identified using existing socioeconomic networks, which may have introduced selection bias. This approach likely over-represented individuals embedded in accessible migrant networks while under-representing isolated individuals and those involved in high-risk activities.

To ensure data security and anonymity, all transcripts were de-identified, participant identifiers were digitally encoded, and data were securely stored using the relevant institution's Research Data Storage Service. The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available owing to participant confidentiality and ethical restrictions. Access may be requested from the corresponding author, subject to applicable ethical and legal requirements.

Reflexivity

The primary researcher (Zerong Li) shared linguistic and cultural familiarity with the participants, which facilitated trust-building and access to sensitive topics. However, this positionality may have influenced the participants' responses, particularly regarding self-presentation and the disclosure of illicit activities. To mitigate potential biases, anonymity was strictly maintained, participation was voluntary, and interviews were conducted in a non-judgmental manner. The use of intermediaries and indirect communication reduced potential pressure on participants. The analysis focused on inconsistencies and atypical cases to avoid over-reliance on dominant narratives.

This study employed WeChat to communicate with the participants due to the platform's widespread implementation among Chinese migrant communities. This enabled anonymous participation in interviews in locations that the participants perceived as safe. However, reliance on WeChat, along with gatekeeper-based recruitment, may have affected the participants' willingness to discuss sensitive experiences and underrepresented isolated individuals and individuals involved in high-risk activities. Despite efforts to ensure anonymity, some participants may have selectively disclosed information or downplayed their involvement due to the sensitive and potentially incriminating nature of the topics discussed.

Results

Urban cannabis cultivation and distribution

Sociodemographic features

Interview data suggest that Chinese immigrants in the cannabis market primarily occupy intermediary and wholesale roles, rather than controlling cultivation. Although prior studies link organized crime to "triads," primarily Hong Kong-based (Whittle, 2022), only one participant reported such affiliations. A cannabis retailer described the situation as follows:

> The term "triads" refers to organizations composed of older generations of Hong Kong migrants within established Chinese migrant communities. As they age, their involvement in high-risk activities declines. Newly arrived migrants are generally willing to work to obtain legal status but are less willing to assume significant risks. Consequently, many individuals in our group intend to remain in the UK only temporarily, accumulate sufficient capital, and then leave. Given this short-term orientation and limited interest in obtaining legal documentation, pursuing rapid financial gain becomes a rational strategy. (UCIP023)

This account suggests that undocumented status may be common among some participants involved in cannabis-related activities. These individuals, predominantly younger male immigrants without formal gang affiliations, often perceive their stay in the UK as temporary.

This suggests that triad affiliation is not a dominant organizing feature among participants in this study, contrasting with earlier accounts that emphasize triad-centered structures (Silverstone, 2011).

Position of Chinese migrants in the cannabis supply chain

Participants reported that Chinese migrants are largely concentrated in intermediary positions within the cannabis supply chain, with limited involvement in primary cultivation. Since 2005, Chinese and Southeast Asian migrants have been involved in the cannabis industry in the UK (Luo et al., 2023; Silverstone, 2011). This pattern is supported by participants' migration and employment histories. Urban cannabis cultivation sites are primarily controlled by other Asian migrant groups and UK-born individuals of Southeast Asian descent (Grace et al., 2025; Silverstone, 2011). Consequently, Participants reported structural barriers to accessing and controlling primary production, redirecting their involvement toward transportation, wholesale, and retail distribution within illicit markets. One participant described this division of labor as follows:

> In the UK, the mainstream drug trade is dominated by locals, primarily white individuals in leadership positions. Asian participants are mainly involved in the cannabis market. Southeast Asian immigrants, with more experience, manage production, while we handle distribution. Collaboration with Vietnamese groups is common. Chinese commercial districts provide high foot traffic, making them suitable for transactions. Although some Chinese-operated cultivation sites exist, they rely heavily on skilled Vietnamese labor. Only a small number of Chinese individuals possess the expertise required for high-yield, high-quality cultivation. (UCIP030)

These accounts indicate that participants are positioned within downstream stages of the supply chain, reflecting constraints in access to resources, technical expertise, and production sites.

Supply chains formed around organized activities

Participants described cannabis distribution as organized through multi-ethnic supply chains involving differentiated roles across production, transportation, and distribution. A participant explained:

> … the location must not be an apartment but rather a house in the suburbs or a factory building in a remote area. Single-family homes are preferred because apartments and townhouses have close neighbors. The strong odor of cannabis is likely to be detected and reported, especially when multiple varieties are cultivated. Therefore, minimizing contact with neighbors is the safest strategy …. (UCIP033)

Following site selection, one or two skilled workers are assigned to cultivate cannabis, maintain the facility, and handle security. However, one participant stated:

> We often cooperate with individuals from other ethnic groups. Skilled workers are difficult to find because they can produce fast-growing, high-quality plants. These groups typically take 20 – 30% of the total profit. They also face the highest risk of arrest, as they must remain at the cultivation site most of the time. After three months, the first harvest is ready. This plant can regenerate after each harvest, allowing multiple production cycles. (UCIP030)

Interview data indicate that Chinese immigrant participants predominantly engaged in the final stages of the supply chain, particularly in sales. Multiple distribution roles are identified, including wholesalers, porters (referred to as "legs" by participants), drivers, parcel collectors, and retailers. However, few Chinese immigrants reported direct involvement in retail-level sales; they primarily supply to other retailers in the bustling hub rather than selling directly to end consumers.

Participants also noted that language barriers and limited integration into local social networks constrain role diversification within the cannabis market. Participants reported that these constraints reinforce the concentration of Chinese immigrants in wholesale and intermediary roles rather than in cultivation or direct retail sales. The supply chain involves native-born actors, Chinese immigrants, and other ethnic groups, with Chinese immigrants primarily functioning as wholesale intermediaries. One participant described this process as follows:

> A skilled plant can yield five to six crops per cycle. Wholesalers typically purchase part or all of each harvest and resell it to local distributors in quantities of 1, 3, or 5 kilograms. These distributors will package and sell to small dealers or directly to

> customers. Sometimes, Chinese actors also import cannabis from neighboring countries and distribute it locally, as prices outside the UK are lower. (UCIP033)

Two underlying factors shape these roles. First, there is a strong disincentive to deal with on-site cultivation owing to the heightened risk of arrest. Second, wholesale transactions are often preferred over direct retail sales, as they increase profit margins while reducing labor demands.

Internal conflicts and tensions

Participants described internal conflicts and risks within cannabis distribution networks, which affect operational stability. First, inadequate concealment of the cultivation site creates opportunities for theft by competitors or other interested parties who may take advantage of this vulnerability. They often wait until plants reach maturity before intervening. Second, robbery following a transaction is a major risk. As transactions are predominantly cash-based, stolen funds are nearly impossible to trace, making cash theft a serious concern among participants. This lack of traceability exacerbates internal conflicts within organizations and among individual members. A former delivery driver described this risk as follows:

> Someone knew the route my delivery would take. Four individuals stopped my vehicle and stole both my vehicle and several hundred pounds in cash. I was held responsible for the loss. I was too afraid and could not call the police. In the beginning, I had initially planned to return home, but I postponed my trip for several months to recover financially. (UCIP023)

These risks highlight the vulnerability of participants operating within informal and unregulated economic environments.

Overall, these findings indicate that Chinese immigrant participants in this study were primarily positioned as intermediaries within multi-ethnic cannabis supply chains, rather than as dominant organizers, thereby challenging triad-centered interpretations of organized crime.

Massage parlors and commercial sexual services

Sociodemographic features

Interview data indicate that migrant-operated massage parlors providing commercial sexual services are organized through structured divisions of labor and operate as concealed, small-scale enterprises embedded within urban residential settings. Some Chinese-owned businesses operate under the guise of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) massage services. Legitimate TCM massage clinics typically focus on treating musculoskeletal conditions using acupuncture,[1] physical therapy, and other traditional methods. However, some establishments labeled as TCM massage clinics reported providing sexual services. It is important to distinguish these establishments from legally registered TCM clinics, which provide medical consultations, prescriptions, and therapeutic[2] massage services. The massage parlors discussed in this section operate as separate entities offering adult services and are typically located away from the main commercial streets. Participants included individuals directly involved in or knowledgeable about this sector, including sex workers, nannies (responsible for the daily care of workers and ensuring site security), and Chinese immigrants working as telephone operators and shop owners.

Massage parlors are characterized by low service fees, short service durations, and high customer turnover, mainly serving local British clients. According to the shop workers, Chinese women aged under 30 years are willing to serve customers of the same ethnicity; however, workers in these establishments typically cannot select clients. Consequently, the availability of young female workers in these establishments is limited. Moreover, more experienced workers showed a higher willingness to participate in interviews. Furthermore, all shop owners interviewed also performed telephone coordination roles; two were female and one was male.

Division of labor and operation mode of massage stores

Participants reported that these establishments operate through clearly defined divisions of labor, involving owners, telephone operators, nannies, and service providers, with responsibilities distributed to minimize risk and maintain operational efficiency. Migrant-operated massage parlors can be categorized into two types: "Dahuo" and "Xiaohuo" establishments. Xiaohuo establishments are typically licensed and employ skilled massage and physiotherapy practitioners. The analysis focuses on Dahuo establishments, described by participants as operating discreetly without formal business registration and providing commercial sexual services.

The interview data identify four key stages in operating a Dahuo establishment. First, shop owners must secure private residential properties, preferably detached houses or upper-floor units, to minimize visibility and reduce suspicion from frequent client visits. To reduce the risk of detection and law enforcement intervention, owners often pay others to rent properties on their behalf, thereby concealing their identities: "There are always individuals willing to rent properties on behalf of others for financial compensation. We typically pay them, and they use their personal information to secure the lease" (DCIP016).

Second, each establishment employs both a nanny and telephone operators. The nanny coordinates workers' daily needs, including food preparation and housekeeping, while telephone operators manage client enquiries, schedule appointments, and greet guests. Participants reported that shop owners sometimes assume part-time telephone operator roles to reduce operational costs. More than half of the participants claimed that owners rarely visit the premises in person, instead managing operations remotely to avoid police attention and public exposure.

Participants reported that workers rotate between establishments on a weekly basis, a strategy used to maintain client demand and maximize earnings. Furthermore, owing to the pandemic and the significant number of people returning to China, the number of workers remaining in this sector in the UK noticeably declined. Consequently, earnings, especially commission-based income, increased; however, their schedules became more demanding. In August 2022, one participant noted, "The shops that invited me to work have already scheduled bookings until March next year, as there are very few workers available now" (UCIP027).

These findings indicate that these establishments operate as highly coordinated and concealed enterprises embedded within residential areas. Key characteristics include the use of massage services as a cover, the predominance of middle-aged female workers, and operations conducted within residential properties. Shop owners typically manage operations remotely and avoid leasing properties under their real identities. The division of labor is clearly defined, with distinct roles for nannies, telephone operators, and service providers.

Working and financial conditions

Participants described working conditions in these establishments as involving relatively high earnings alongside intensive labor demands, limited autonomy, and constrained working conditions. According to interview data, weekly earnings before the pandemic were £1,000–1,500. Following pandemic-related restrictions, weekly earnings averaged £500–873. Workers are required to begin duties at 11:00 am, with rest periods depending on the departure time of the final client. During their weekly rotation, workers are expected to serve clients continuously. Participants reported that high-performing establishments serve 13–15 clients daily, whereas less busy venues require each worker to attend to at least 6–7 customers daily. One participant stated, "I usually work in high-traffic establishments, where serving 15 customers daily is normal. The money earned is shared with the owner" (UCIP012).

Participants reported that workers have limited ability to refuse clients and must serve a wide range of customers, particularly in establishments targeting local clientele. Some participants indicated that marketing strategies involve presenting workers as younger than their actual age, particularly to non-Asian clients.

Conversely, older workers who find it more difficult to establish themselves within the Asian customer market are more likely to remain in Dahuo establishments serving local clients. Consequently, they cannot refuse customers based on nationality, age, or appearance, and must provide services to any paying customer. To cope with demanding working conditions, some workers indulge in shopping and entertainment during their limited time off. Interview data suggest that, despite relatively high earnings, none of the participants managed to save a significant portion of their income. In addition to sending money to family members in China, earnings are often spent on clothing, luxury items, jewelry, cosmetics, and dining. Two participants reported engaging in gambling, which resulted in substantial debt. One woman who had worked in the industry for 12 years explained, "I find it difficult to save money. The work is exhausting. We only have a few days off each month, so we try to enjoy ourselves when we can" (UCIP027). Another participant, who had cleared a gambling-related debt, stated, "I have worked in the industry for many years. I cannot even estimate how much I spent on gambling. I previously owed £160,000 and worked for years to repay it. I now live with my boyfriend and have quit gambling" (UCIP012).

These findings suggest that income levels are offset by intensive labor demands, limited autonomy, and long working hours, contributing to prolonged participation in the sector.

Robbery and police raids

The promise of high earnings in Dahuo establishments is accompanied by significant risks to personal safety and financial security. Interview data indicate that the primary threats within this sector are organized robberies and law enforcement raids, both of which may result in arrests.

Robberies targeting these establishments are typically premeditated and systematically organized. Participants frequently reported that the establishments in which they worked have experienced robbery. As these women stay in each store for a week, their work and payment schedules follow a predictable pattern, with workers typically operating from Monday to Saturday and relocating on Sundays. Consequently, Saturday evenings present a heightened risk, as accumulated cash holdings make these establishments attractive targets. Despite these incidents, Dahuo establishments rarely report robberies to the police owing to their involvement in illicit activities. One shop owner explained, "Over the past decade, I have encountered numerous robberies involving individuals from various ethnic backgrounds. These groups specialize in targeting establishments involved in cannabis, massage parlors, and cash-based transactions" (UCIP007).

Moreover, Dahuo establishments are vulnerable to law enforcement raids. For instance, in February 2022, two individuals were arrested in Birmingham for operating a brothel (ITV News, 2022). Similarly, in 2025, a Chinese national posing as an estate agent was convicted in the UK for operating brothels (Maisner, 2025). As these establishments operate within residential properties, police investigations often rely on reports from neighbors, rival actors, or dissatisfied customers. Interview data reveal that nannies are more likely to have experienced police arrests at some point, while fewer female massage therapists interviewed encountered police raids during their working hours. As nannies are required to remain on-site continuously, they face the highest exposure to both criminal and law enforcement risks. One participant described her experience:

> I initially tried to reduce costs by answering calls myself and acting as a receptionist. Later, a girl in my store, who is also my friend, told me the owner was arrested. Although I don't know him, I have heard of him … He stayed in the store as a part-time receptionist to save employee expenses, so he was in the store when the police came. He was unlucky. After that, I stopped saving this expense and hired someone to answer the phone. I rarely visited the store. (DCIP016)

Similar to cannabis distribution, these establishments operate largely on cash-based transactions. These activities, along with legal small businesses (e.g., takeaway food services), provide GBP within informal currency exchange networks.

Private currency cash exchange as informal financial infrastructure

Sociodemographic features

Interview data indicate that private currency exchange operates as a key mechanism within migrant economic networks, linking cash-based business activity with cross-border currency conversion. Chinese migrant communities in the UK serve as major hubs for private cash exchange, characterized by a high concentration of exchange dealers and Chinese-owned restaurants, takeaways, and retail outlets handling substantial volumes of cash transactions. Restaurant operators, in particular, may incentivize cash payments through discounts and employ various strategies to facilitate such payments. Owing to regulatory constraints, business owners often struggle to convert GBP earnings into RMB through official bank transfers.

Participants reported that private currency exchange networks provide an alternative method by enabling GBP's conversion into RMB outside formal banking systems, making it difficult to trace the source of funds. Participants reported that this practice may allow some shop owners to exchange GBP for RMB while underreporting taxable income. To secure a steady supply of cash, private currency exchange dealers maintain close relationships with local Chinese-owned businesses. Consequently, these dealers either operate directly in Chinese settlements or maintain a strong presence. A DCI dealer explained:

> I am familiar with many Chinese restaurant owners in this area. I typically visit their stores or homes once a week to collect cash and pay them in RMB. The settlement time of each restaurant is different, but the frequency is weekly. (DCIP035)

Participants reported that both UCIs and DCIs use these services, although their roles differ.

Interview data indicate that UCIs rely on this transactional method. In total, 63 participants reported using a private currency exchange service at least once. Although some DCIs initially indicated no need for such services, they later confirmed in interviews that they had exchanged currency for various purposes. The data suggest that UCIs are often positioned as sellers of GBP; some also act as part-time dealers or full-time private exchange dealers. Conversely, DCIs tend to shift more flexibly between buyers and sellers depending on currency demand. Moreover, participants reported direct involvement in selling GBP cash to exchange clients. They stated that a small number of individuals act as group leaders and wholesalers, while a large proportion operate as drivers and dealers transporting funds from different places. Unlike retail dealers, group leaders handle high-value wholesale transactions of up to GBP 100,000 per exchange, before expanding into retail activities. Additionally, some participants were Chinese international students enrolled in UK universities on valid visas, representing a notable level of involvement in these exchange networks. One participant explained:

> Nowadays, many students are engaged in part-time private currency exchange. Many are young people who first came to the UK to study. They know many international students, providing a steady customer base. After all, many international students need pounds, and they have RMB in their hands. (UCIP034)

Process of private cash exchange

Participants described private currency exchange as a routine and normalized practice, often not perceived as unlawful despite operating outside formal financial systems. In practice, these exchanges operate similarly to informal currency exchange services, facilitating the conversion of RMB and GBP based on real-time exchange rates while charging a service fee. Unlike formal exchange outlets, private dealers may offer RMB holders the opportunity to purchase GBP at a lower exchange rate without additional service charges. They may also provide delivery options, allowing customers to obtain cash without visiting a physical location. This convenience contributes to the popularity of such services among international students, many of whom save RMB but require GBP for daily expenses. One participant shared their experience with a private currency exchange:

> When I purchased my car, I exchanged currency four times to obtain sufficient funds. Because the British Car Auction would not accept RMB, when I paid the deposit, I asked my classmates and roommates to exchange some, but it was still not enough, so I had to find someone to exchange currency to get additional pounds. (DCIP003)

Participants reported that profit generation is primarily based on the margin between wholesale and retail exchange rates. For example, if the public GBP-to-RMB exchange rate on a given day is 8.6, private dealers in Chinese restaurants may sell GBP at approximately 8.3 while acquiring it at wholesale rates as low as 8.0, generating a margin of 0.3 per unit exchanged.

Participants highlighted that the sustainability of this system depends on a continuous supply of GBP cash within these networks.

Source of cash

Interview data indicate that GBP circulating within private exchange networks originates from both illicit and legitimate economic activities. The latter comes primarily from small businesses, including restaurants, bubble tea shops, beauty salons, and retail outlets. Business owners may sell their GBP cash to a private exchange dealer at rates below the official exchange rate to obtain RMB and reduce tax liabilities. Illicit activities were also reported as a source of GBP cash. By converting GBP to RMB outside formal banking systems, business owners underreport earnings, thereby reducing taxable revenue. This renders selling pounds at lower exchange rates financially more advantageous than declaring full taxable income:

> In many Chinese restaurants, customers can receive a 5 – 10% discount for paying in cash, as they can quickly exchange it. For example, some KTVs (karaoke bars) require you to pay in cash or RMB, meaning they have already considered tax avoidance. (UCIP004)

Furthermore, illicit activities represent a significant source of GBP cash. These include profits from drug sales (particularly cannabis), massage parlors providing sexual services, robbery, and financial fraud, including online and telephone scams. Cash is the preferred medium in these transactions, as it allows criminals to move money discreetly while facilitating the circulation of funds through informal currency exchange mechanisms. Most participants, including both UCIs and DCIS, reported sourcing GBP primarily from legitimate business owners. However, three individuals acknowledged acquiring cash of uncertain origin. One participant explained:

> We avoid accepting cash from cannabis sales, because of the strong odor. Customers may complain, and such money may attract police attention. Of course, the exchange rate will be lower when this kind of money is collected owing to associated risks. (UCIP019)

Risks during cash exchange and associated criminal activities

Private currency exchange operations are highly vulnerable to criminal activities, particularly robbery and fraud. As these exchanges may involve undeclared income, tax evasion, or the circulation of illicit proceeds, participants may operate outside or at the margins of formal financial protections, increasing their vulnerability to criminal activity. Limited regulatory oversight exacerbates vulnerability to organized criminal activities.

Robbery is the primary risk faced by GBP dealers. Dealers are attractive targets because they frequently handle large amounts of physical cash. Perpetrators often act as legitimate clients, initially engaging in small transactions *via* platforms such as WeChat to build trust. Once trust is established, they propose high-value exchanges, such as £50,000, exploiting reduced vigilance among dealers accustomed to routine transactions. At this point, organized groups execute planned robberies.

Interview data indicate that more than half of participants involved in exchange activities experienced theft, sometimes involving substantial losses. One participant shared:

> I haven't been robbed, but there are cases of robbery around me, many of which involved colleagues who know when you collect pound cash and then intercept individuals during transit. For example, they stop your car on the road and rob you. I have a friend who was robbed on his way to London from another place. (UCIP003)

Additionally, fraud has become an increasingly significant risk within private currency exchange networks. Fraudulent schemes frequently involve individuals posing as exchange dealers and engaging clients through WeChat. Customers are instructed to transfer RMB in advance, after which fraudsters provide false confirmations of GBP transfer, claiming, "We have deposited the physical British pound notes in the bank, and the transfer has been electronically processed, but there may be delays in the banking systems. Please wait a few hours for the balance to be updated" (UCIP014). By the time victims realize the deception, the fraudster has disappeared. One participant noted, "Since the pandemic, this type of fraud has made life miserable for us. That's why we now refuse to release pound cash to customers unless we see the RMB in our account first" (UCIP019).

These risks reveal the vulnerability of exchange networks operating outside formal legal protection. These findings highlight private currency exchange as an underexamined but important mechanism linking cash-based business activity, undeclared income, and illicit financial flows within migrant economic networks.

Discussion

Differentiated roles and internal hierarchy

The findings suggest that illicit livelihood strategies among Chinese immigrants in the UK are not organized as cohesive criminal structures; rather, they operate through differentiated roles and internal hierarchies shaped by legal status, access to resources, and position within migrant networks.

Participants in this study rarely occupied dominant positions within cannabis distribution networks, instead functioning as intermediaries and wholesalers. While some UCIs operated in lower-level roles, DCIs or permanent residents with greater social and economic capital more often held positions of leadership and influence. This challenges assumptions that undocumented immigrants are primary drivers of criminal activity within migrant communities (Dzhuzha et al., 2025; Van der Leun & Ilies, 2025).

A similar pattern of differentiation is evident in massage parlors offering sexual services. Organizational structures typically involve a defined division of labor among owners, telephone operators, nannies, and service providers, with participants occupying distinct roles depending on experience, age, and access to resources. Owners may play multiple roles to reduce operational costs, while workers often face long working hours, limited autonomy, and significant physical and psychological strain. This complicates dominant framings of such venues primarily as sites of coercion or trafficking, by highlighting more varied forms of participation and organization (Matolcsi et al., 2021).

These findings suggest that participation in illicit economic activities is structured through differentiated roles and internal hierarchies rather than unified organizational control. This challenges representations of Chinese immigrants as forming cohesive criminal groups and contrasts with earlier narratives that emphasized the role of Chinese triads in organized crime (Westmore, 2025; Whittle, 2022). Additionally, these findings extend existing critiques of organized crime frameworks by demonstrating that migrant participation is fragmented and role-differentiated rather than organized through cohesive, hierarchical criminal groups (Silverstone, 2011; Whittle & Silverstone, 2024).

Informal financial infrastructure (currency exchange)

The findings highlight the role of private currency exchange as a form of informal financial infrastructure within migrant economic networks.

Compared with cannabis distribution and commercial sexual services, participants in this study often described private currency exchange as a routine economic practice.

Participants profit from the spreads between wholesale and retail exchange rates when trading GBP and RMB. Concurrently, these practices enable small business owners to convert cash earnings while underreporting taxable income and provide mechanisms through which illicit activities can be integrated into financial flows. In this sense, private currency exchange functions as a key linkage between legal economic activity, undeclared income, and illicit transactions within migrant communities.

However, this activity involves significant risks. Participants frequently transport large volumes of cash without formal protection, making them vulnerable to robbery and fraud, while organized robberies increasingly target currency exchange and dealers. This demonstrates how secondary forms of criminal activity emerge around informal financial networks, reinforcing their embeddedness within broader illicit economic systems. This supports recent work on informal economies by illustrating how such practices are embedded within broader economic structures shaped by inequality and institutional exclusion (Chen, 2023). It also suggests that private currency exchange may be understood as a form of informal financial infrastructure linking legal and illicit economic activities.

Victim – offender overlap and constrained participation

The findings highlight the role of structural constraints in shaping immigrants' engagement in illicit economic activities. Both DCIs and UCIs participate in these sectors, although their roles and opportunities differ significantly. Legal status provides access to resources that allow individuals to secure housing, operate businesses, and mobilize wider social networks, while UCIs often depend on these networks for access to economic opportunities beyond low-wage labor. Simultaneously, such arrangements may reproduce hierarchical inequalities and expose some participants to exploitation and unequal power relations.

The persistence of these livelihood strategies reflects broader structural conditions affecting migrant communities in the UK, particularly immigration restrictions and limited access to formal labor markets. This aligns with research demonstrating how structural exclusion and labor market barriers shape migrant participation in informal and illicit economies (Luo et al., 2023). These constraints may encourage immigrants to seek alternative sources of income. For some participants, involvement in illicit activities does not appear as a fixed criminal identity but as a pragmatic response to constrained socioeconomic conditions, with some pursuing high-risk strategies for rapid financial return and others engaging on a temporary or part-time basis.

These dynamics produce a pattern in which participants may simultaneously occupy positions of vulnerability and participation within illicit economic systems. Individuals involved in these sectors frequently become targets of robbery or fraud, yet the lack of formal legal protection discourages them from seeking assistance from law enforcement. This supports the concept of the victim–offender overlap, showing how participants in this study may simultaneously occupy positions of vulnerability and participation within structurally constrained economic environments (Kahlmeter, 2023; Wang, 2024).

This study contributes to research on migration and crime in three ways. First, it shows that Chinese immigrants involved in illicit economies in the UK do not form a single, unified criminal structure but rather occupy differentiated positions across sectors and supply chains. Second, it demonstrates that legal status is not simply a background characteristic; it structures access to resources, role allocation, and vulnerability within illicit and informal markets. Third, it identifies private informal currency exchange as a key financial infrastructure linking legal small-business activity, undeclared income, and illicit proceeds.

These findings shift the analysis away from ethnicized organized crime narratives and toward a framework that links illicit livelihood strategies to structural exclusion, informal economic organization, and internal hierarchy within migrant communities. Moreover, they highlight that policing practices, immigration regimes, and limited access to legal protection shape the criminalization and vulnerability of ethnic minority migrants.

Policy implications

These findings have important implications for immigration policy and criminal justice. Increasingly restrictive immigration regimes and limited access to formal labor markets may contribute to immigrants' reliance on informal and illicit livelihood strategies, potentially reinforcing ethnicized criminalization and social marginalization. Ensuring that both documented and undocumented immigrants have equal access to legal protection and criminal justice processes is crucial when combating criminal activities.

Furthermore, communication and trust between immigrant communities, government agencies, and local communities should be strengthened. Labor protection for immigrants, particularly undocumented ones, should be improved, and transparent, evidence-based, and accessible pathways for undocumented immigrants to obtain legal status should be developed.

This may help reduce participation in high-risk informal economic activities.

Finally, policing approaches that tend to frame crimes involving Chinese immigrants primarily through organized crime narratives should be revised. Recognizing the victim–offender overlap and the differentiated vulnerabilities experienced by immigrants may encourage vulnerable groups in the informal economy to report crimes such as robbery, fraud, exploitation, and forced labor. These approaches would enhance trust in law enforcement, improve crime prevention, and facilitate effective interventions in vulnerable migrant communities.

Conclusion

This study examined illicit livelihood strategies among Chinese immigrants in the UK, focusing on how participation is structured across sectors, shaped by migrant networks, and associated with differentiated risks and vulnerabilities. Drawing on 70 semi-structured interviews with UCIs and DCIs, three major sectors were identified: cannabis cultivation and distribution, commercial sexual services in massage parlors, and private informal currency exchange.

The findings demonstrate that Chinese immigrants occupy different positions across these sectors rather than assuming a single, uniform role. In the cannabis market, they primarily serve as intermediaries and wholesalers within multi-ethnic supply chains. Conversely, massage parlors and private currency exchange networks involve stronger internal organizations, where individuals may assume roles such as shop owners, managers, or currency dealers.

Furthermore, this study highlights internal inequalities within migrant communities. UCIs, owing to their lack of legal status and restricted access to formal employment, are more likely to occupy vulnerable and labor-intensive positions in these economic activities. In many cases, DCIs control key resources and UCIs often depend on them to access economic opportunities. This dynamic can reproduce unequal power dynamics and internal exploitation within these migrant communities.

Participants across these sectors face multiple risks, including robbery, fraud, internal disputes, and police enforcement. As these activities operate outside formal legal protection, immigrants often occupy the dual positions of perpetrators and victims. These findings show that illicit livelihood strategies among Chinese immigrants are shaped by structural exclusion, differentiated access to resources, internal hierarchy, and unequal access to legal protection, and therefore they cannot be adequately understood through either a singular "organized crime" framework or a purely "victimization" lens. This study contributes to migration–crime scholarship by reframing illicit economic participation as structured, differentiated, and embedded within informal economic systems rather than as evidence of cohesive criminal organization.

This study has several limitations. The sample was recruited through intermediaries and, therefore, likely reflects participants embedded within specific networks and sectors. As such, the findings should be understood as indicative of particular configurations of illicit livelihood strategies rather than representative of the broader Chinese migrant population in the UK.

Future research could extend this analysis in several directions. Comparative studies across different migrant groups would help assess whether similar patterns of role differentiation and informal economic organization emerge beyond Chinese migrant communities. Further work across different UK localities could also examine how local regulatory environments and labor market conditions shape participation in illicit economies. Additionally, research on other forms of informal financial infrastructure would deepen understanding of how legal, undeclared, and illicit economic activities are interconnected.

Notes

1. Acupuncture is a TCM practice that involves inserting thin needles into specific points on the body to promote healing, relieve pain, and restore balance in the body's energy flow (Sherman et al., 2005).
2. Therapeutic massage services refer to professional hands-on techniques designed to relieve muscle tension, reduce pain, improve circulation, and enhance overall well-being (Kennedy et al., 2016).

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Zerong Li**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft; **Bayes Ahmed**: Supervision.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access is restricted due to the sensitive nature of the research involving undocumented and vulnerable participants and the inclusion of potentially identifiable information. Therefore, the data are not publicly available. Data sharing is subject to ethical approval and will be limited to fully anonymized materials where appropriate.

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