

From Margins to Center: A Comparative Study of Community Belonging among Cleaning Workers in Beijing, Shenzhen, and Local Communities in China

Meihui Guo

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China
guomeihui353@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper explores the community belonging and social integration of cleaning workers in Beijing, Shenzhen, and local communities, focusing on the lived experiences of migrant workers in urban settings. Despite playing a crucial role in maintaining city infrastructure, these workers often face social marginalization, low job satisfaction, and a sense of alienation. The study employs semi-structured interviews and literature reviews to examine how different urban environments and community structures impact the emotional and social well-being of these workers. By analyzing case studies of local cleaning workers in Beijing's Zhujing Dijing Community and Shenzhen's "Green Rose" women's organization, the research identifies key factors contributing to the sense of belonging, or lack thereof, within these communities. Findings reveal that interactions with community members, support networks, and participation in social activities are critical in shaping workers' feelings of inclusion. However, the repetitive nature of their work, combined with low wages and limited social mobility, often leads to emotional detachment and a "numbness" towards their labor and social environment. Comparing the experiences of workers in Beijing, Shenzhen, and local communities, the study highlights significant differences in social integration, with community-driven initiatives such as the "Green Rose" model offering promising solutions to improve workers' sense of belonging. The paper concludes by proposing policy recommendations to enhance the community integration of migrant workers, including establishing community centers and fostering stronger social networks within urban environments. These initiatives aim to improve their professional value recognition and overall well-being.

1. Introduction

The rapid urbanization of China has led to significant internal migration, with millions of rural workers moving to cities in search of better economic opportunities. These migrant workers play a crucial role in maintaining urban infrastructure, yet they often remain socially marginalized and invisible. Among them, cleaning workers represent a particularly vulnerable group, characterized by low wages, high labor intensity, and limited opportunities for upward social mobility. Despite their essential contributions to urban life, these workers frequently experience a profound sense of alienation and lack of community belonging. This research aims to explore the factors contributing to the community belonging of cleaning workers, focusing on comparative cases in Beijing, Shenzhen, and local communities.

Migrant workers, particularly those engaged in low-skilled and labor-intensive industries such as cleaning, often face structural barriers to social integration. These barriers include poor working conditions, lack of job security, and exclusion from formal social support systems. In the context of China's rapid urbanization, rural-urban migrants encounter challenges in forming long-term community ties due to their transient employment and residential situations. Previous studies have documented how these workers are often viewed as outsiders in the communities they serve, further exacerbating their sense of isolation and alienation [1].

Cleaning workers, specifically, are subject to what has been described as "invisible labor." Their

work, while vital to the maintenance of public and private spaces, often goes unrecognized by the broader society. This invisibility extends beyond the physical realm, affecting their social and emotional well-being. Many cleaning workers report feelings of "numbness" toward their labor, a coping mechanism to deal with the monotonous, repetitive nature of their work and the lack of social acknowledgment they receive [2]. This research seeks to understand how this sense of detachment develops and how it affects their sense of community belonging.

This study addresses two key research questions: first, what are the factors that contribute to the sense of community belonging (or lack thereof) among cleaning workers in different urban environments? Second, how do social empowerment initiatives, such as the "Green Rose" in Shenzhen and "Hongyan" in Beijing, influence the social integration of these workers? By comparing the experiences of cleaning workers in Beijing, Shenzhen, and local communities, this research aims to identify the structural and social factors that shape their experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

This study draws on several theoretical frameworks to analyze the experiences of cleaning workers. First, Hannah Arendt's theory of labor, work, and action provides a useful lens through which to understand the emotional detachment that many workers feel toward their labor. According to Arendt, labor is associated with repetitive, survival-oriented tasks that do not offer the individual a sense of purpose or fulfillment [3]. In the case of cleaning workers, their daily tasks are often seen as mere survival activities, which contributes to their sense of alienation.

Karl Marx's concept of alienated labor is also relevant here. Marx argued that under capitalist systems, workers are often alienated from the products of their labor, from the labor process itself, from their own humanity, and from other workers [5]. Cleaning workers, particularly those in urban environments, experience this form of alienation acutely, as their labor is physically demanding yet socially invisible. This alienation is exacerbated by the lack of meaningful social interactions within the communities they serve.

Finally, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and social capital offers insights into how cleaning workers navigate their social environments. Bourdieu defines habitus as a system of dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences, which shapes their perceptions, actions, and opportunities [5]. For cleaning workers, their habitus is shaped by their rural backgrounds and their status as migrants, which affects their ability to build social capital within urban communities. This research uses Bourdieu's framework to analyze how workers' social positions influence their sense of belonging and integration.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on migrant labor, community belonging, and social integration in urban China. While much attention has been paid to the economic contributions of migrant workers, less is known about their social and emotional experiences, particularly in relation to community integration. By focusing on cleaning workers, this study highlights the unique challenges faced by this under-researched group, offering insights into the broader issue of social inclusion for low-wage, low-status workers.

Furthermore, this research offers practical implications for policymakers and community organizers. By identifying the factors that enhance or hinder community belonging, this study provides a basis for developing policies and programs that promote the social integration of migrant workers. Specifically, it suggests that community-driven initiatives, such as the "Green Rose" and "Hongyan" models, could serve as valuable frameworks for empowering cleaning workers and improving their social and emotional well-being [6].

This study seeks to answer critical questions about the social integration of cleaning workers in urban China, offering a comparative analysis of their experiences in Beijing, Shenzhen, and local communities. Through a combination of interviews, case studies, and theoretical analysis, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape community belonging among this marginalized group.

2. Related Work

The topic of migrant labor, particularly in the context of urban cleaning workers, has garnered

increasing attention in recent years due to the rapid urbanization of developing countries like China. Previous studies have explored various dimensions of migrant labor, such as social integration, community belonging, labor alienation, and empowerment initiatives. This section reviews the existing literature that informs the current study, focusing on three major areas: community belonging and social integration, labor alienation, and empowerment through social initiatives.

2.1. Community Belonging and Social Integration

The concept of community belonging is central to understanding the social experiences of migrant workers, particularly those employed in low-wage sectors like cleaning. Community belonging refers to the sense of being part of a social network that provides emotional and material support. Migrant workers often struggle to develop this sense of belonging due to their temporary residency status and economic marginalization. The study examines how internal migrants in China face systemic barriers to community integration, resulting in feelings of alienation and social exclusion [1]. Migrants are frequently regarded as outsiders in urban communities, and their social mobility is often restricted by both economic pressures and local policies.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of social networks in fostering a sense of belonging among migrant workers. According to Bourdieu's theory of social capital, individuals derive social capital from their connections within a community, which in turn influences their social standing and opportunities for upward mobility [5]. However, for many migrant workers, building these networks is challenging due to their transient nature and the exclusionary practices of urban communities. The research discusses how migrant workers' lack of stable residency and limited access to social services hinder their ability to integrate into urban social systems, thus weakening their sense of belonging [7].

In the context of cleaning workers, community belonging is further complicated by their "invisible" labor. Cleaning work is often seen as low-status and non-essential, despite its critical role in maintaining urban environments. This invisibility extends to the workers themselves, who are often overlooked by the very communities they serve. The study argues that this lack of recognition contributes to a deep sense of isolation among cleaning workers, many of whom report feelings of numbness toward their work and social environments [2].

2.2. Labor Alienation

Labor alienation is another key concept in understanding the experiences of migrant cleaning workers. Karl Marx's theory of alienated labor provides a useful framework for analyzing the disconnection that workers feel from their labor, the products of their labor, and the larger social systems in which they operate. Marx argues that under capitalist modes of production, workers are often alienated from their labor because they do not own or control the means of production. Instead, their labor becomes a commodity, and they are reduced to mere instruments of production [4]. For cleaning workers in urban China, this alienation manifests in several ways: their labor is repetitive, low-paid, and socially invisible, leading to feelings of emotional detachment from both their work and the communities they serve.

Building on Marx's theory, Arendt offers a distinction between labor, work, and action in her analysis of human activity. According to Arendt, labor is the most basic form of human activity, associated with the necessities of survival and devoid of any higher meaning or lasting impact. Work, on the other hand, involves the creation of durable objects, while action refers to political engagement and collective decision-making [3]. For cleaning workers, their tasks are categorized as labor—they are repetitive, survival-oriented activities that offer little in terms of fulfillment or social recognition. This framework helps to explain the "numbness" that many workers report, as their labor is not only physically exhausting but also devoid of social meaning.

Empirical studies on migrant workers in China have supported these theoretical insights. The research found that many migrant workers experience alienation due to the precarious nature of their employment, which offers little opportunity for personal or professional growth. In addition, migrant workers often feel disconnected from the communities they serve, as their work is largely unseen and undervalued. The study further notes that the lack of recognition and social interaction

exacerbates feelings of alienation among cleaning workers, many of whom describe their work as monotonous and emotionally draining [8].

2.3. Empowerment Through Social Initiatives

In recent years, there has been growing interest in how empowerment initiatives can improve the social integration and well-being of migrant workers. These initiatives often aim to enhance workers' sense of community belonging by providing them with opportunities for social engagement, skills development, and cultural expression. Two notable examples in China are the "Hongyan" organization in Beijing and the "Green Rose" initiative in Shenzhen, both of which focus on empowering female migrant workers through community-building activities.

The "Hongyan" initiative, established in 2014, provides a space for domestic and cleaning workers to gather, share experiences, and participate in cultural and educational activities. It also advocates for the rights of migrant workers and promotes social integration by fostering a sense of community among its members. The "Green Rose" initiative in Shenzhen focuses on empowering female migrant workers by providing them with opportunities for personal growth and social participation. Through activities such as dance classes, skill workshops, and social gatherings, "Green Rose" helps to build a sense of solidarity among its members, thereby enhancing their social integration [9].

These initiatives are crucial in addressing the structural factors that contribute to the marginalization of migrant workers. By offering a platform for social engagement, they help to reduce the feelings of isolation and alienation that many workers experience. Moreover, these initiatives provide workers with the skills and social capital needed to improve their labor conditions and advocate for their rights.

3. Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the community belonging and social integration of cleaning workers in urban China. The research design includes semi-structured interviews, field observations, and case study analyses, supported by literature review.

3.1. Research Design

The central aim of this research is to compare the community belonging and social integration of cleaning workers in three distinct urban environments: Beijing, Shenzhen, and a local community. The study focuses on understanding how different urban contexts, community structures, and social initiatives affect the emotional and social well-being of cleaning workers. A comparative case study design is used to provide a detailed analysis of these different environments and how they shape workers' experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

The case study method is particularly useful for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena in real-life contexts [10]. By comparing different urban environments and empowerment initiatives, the study seeks to identify the social and structural factors that influence the sense of belonging among cleaning workers. This approach also helps to reveal the local variations in social integration and how these variations are shaped by broader social, economic, and political forces.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

In this study, we use purposive sampling to select participants for the semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that involves selecting individuals who are particularly knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon being studied [11]. In this case, participants were selected based on their occupation as cleaning workers and their work experience in different urban environments. A total of 30 participants were selected for the study, with 10 cleaning workers each from Beijing, Shenzhen, and a local community in a less urbanized region.

Participants were chosen to reflect a diverse range of experiences in terms of age, gender, work experience, and duration of stay in the urban environment. This variation in the sample ensures that the study captures a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to community belonging and social integration. Additionally, the selection of workers from both state-supported and private cleaning services allows the study to explore how different employment conditions might impact workers' social experiences.

The study also includes interviews with key informants from the “Hongyan” and “Green Rose” empowerment organizations, as well as community leaders, to gather additional insights on the role of social initiatives in promoting community belonging among cleaning workers.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews with cleaning workers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility while allowing for in-depth exploration of key themes. The interview guide was designed to cover several key themes, including: Participants’ background and migration experience, Working conditions and job satisfaction, Experiences of community interaction and social support, Perceived sense of belonging within the community, Emotional responses to work, such as feelings of "numbness" or detachment, Involvement in or awareness of empowerment initiatives, such as “Hongyan” and “Green Rose”.

Table 1 Themes Identified in Interviews with Cleaning Workers.

Theme	Frequency (Beijing)	Frequency (Shenzhen)	Frequency (Local Community)	Sample Quote
Social Exclusion	8	6	4	"We are here, but no one really sees us."
Labor Alienation	10	8	5	"It's the same work every day, and no one seems to care if I do it well or not."
Informal Social Networks	5	7	7	"We look out for each other because no one else will."
Involvement in Empowerment Programs	2	9	3	"Being part of Green Rose makes me feel seen and valued."

Table 1 shows the key themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews, along with sample quotes and frequency of each theme across the regions. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and was conducted either in person or via telephone, depending on participants' availability. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

3.3.2. Field Observations

In addition to interviews, field observations were conducted in the three selected communities. Field observation is an important method in qualitative research that allows the researcher to observe participants in their natural environments, providing context to their interview responses. Observations focused on how cleaning workers interact with community members, participate in community activities, and engage with their work environment. Special attention was given to identifying any informal social networks or support systems that may exist within the community. Field notes were taken to document these interactions and observations, which later contributed to the analysis of community belonging and social engagement.

3.3.3. Case Study Analysis

This research also includes case study analysis of two key empowerment initiatives: the “Hongyan” organization in Beijing and the “Green Rose” initiative in Shenzhen. These initiatives were selected because they represent two of the most prominent models for empowering female migrant workers in urban China. Case study research is particularly well-suited for understanding

complex social programs and how they operate in real-world settings [12]. The case study analysis draws on a combination of interviews with organization leaders, participants, and document analysis, including public reports and internal publications from the organizations.

The “Hongyan” organization, established in 2014, focuses on providing migrant workers with a space for social engagement, personal development, and cultural expression. Through activities such as skill training, social events, and advocacy for workers' rights, the organization seeks to empower female cleaning workers and enhance their sense of belonging within urban communities. Similarly, the “Green Rose” initiative in Shenzhen focuses on fostering solidarity among female migrant workers by organizing dance groups, workshops, and social gatherings. Both organizations aim to address the social isolation experienced by migrant workers by creating opportunities for social participation and community engagement.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data collected from the interviews and field observations. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for flexibility in exploring both the explicit and implicit meanings in the data, making it well-suited for examining complex social phenomena such as community belonging and social integration.

The analysis followed a six-step process as outlined by Braun and Clarke [13]: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Initial coding was done using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and analysis of large volumes of qualitative data. Codes were developed inductively, meaning they were derived directly from the data rather than imposed by the researcher's preconceived categories.

Key themes identified through this analysis included: (1) experiences of social exclusion, (2) feelings of "numbness" or detachment from work, (3) community interactions and informal social networks, (4) involvement in empowerment initiatives, and (5) the role of community and organizational support in enhancing social integration. These themes were then used to compare the experiences of cleaning workers across the three different urban environments.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, several ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. All participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants, and all data was stored securely to ensure privacy. Additionally, particular care was taken when discussing participants' working conditions, as some topics (e.g., wage inequality or unfair treatment) could be emotionally distressing.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Social Exclusion and Community Belonging

A recurring theme across the interviews was the pervasive sense of social exclusion that cleaning workers experience in urban environments. Despite living and working within the same communities, many workers reported feeling like "outsiders," largely disconnected from the urban residents they serve. As one participant in Beijing noted, “We work here every day, but it feels like we are invisible to the people who live here. No one really sees us, and we don't belong to their world.”

This feeling of exclusion was particularly pronounced in Beijing and Shenzhen, where the size and density of the urban population often made it difficult for cleaning workers to form meaningful social connections with residents. Many participants described their interactions with residents as limited to brief, transactional exchanges related to their cleaning duties.

However, there were notable differences between cities in terms of the level of exclusion

experienced by workers. In Shenzhen, participants reported slightly more positive interactions with residents, possibly due to the city's reputation for being more inclusive of migrant workers. One participant stated, "People here are friendlier, they sometimes talk to me and ask how I am. It's not much, but it's better than in other places I've worked." This suggests that local cultural factors and social dynamics can influence the degree of exclusion experienced by migrant workers.

4.2. Emotional "Numbness" and Labor Alienation

One of the most striking findings was the widespread expression of emotional "numbness" among cleaning workers, particularly in relation to their labor. Workers frequently described their jobs as monotonous, physically exhausting, and emotionally draining, leading to a sense of detachment from both their work and their surroundings. As one participant explained, "At first, I cared about doing my job well. But after a while, you just go through the motions. It's the same thing every day, and no one seems to notice if you do a good job or not."

This emotional detachment can be understood through the lens of labor alienation, as articulated by Karl Marx. According to Marx, workers in capitalist systems are often alienated from their labor because they do not control the means of production or the products of their labor. This alienation results in a disconnection between the worker and the work, leading to feelings of powerlessness and emotional detachment. For the cleaning workers in this study, their labor is highly repetitive and lacks social recognition, contributing to a sense of disillusionment and "numbness" over time.

Additionally, the workers' isolation from the products of their labor further exacerbates this alienation. Many participants expressed frustration that their work was not appreciated by the residents of the communities they served. One worker stated, "I clean the same hallways and stairwells every day, but no one ever thanks me. Sometimes it feels like I don't exist." This lack of acknowledgment and social engagement contributes to the emotional exhaustion that many workers experience, reinforcing the alienation of their labor.

4.3. Informal Social Networks and Community Interactions

Despite the social exclusion they face, many cleaning workers have developed informal social networks with their colleagues, which serve as an important source of emotional and social support. These networks are often formed through shared experiences of labor and marginalization. One participant described how the camaraderie among cleaning workers helped her cope with the challenges of the job: "We all look out for each other. If someone is having a tough day, we try to help out, even if it's just by talking during breaks."

These informal networks often function as substitutes for the formal community interactions that are largely inaccessible to migrant workers. In many cases, these networks provide not only emotional support but also practical assistance, such as sharing information about job opportunities or resources for migrant workers. In this way, cleaning workers create their own sense of community within the broader urban environment, even if they are excluded from formal community participation.

This finding aligns with Bourdieu's concept of social capital, which emphasizes the value of social networks in providing individuals with resources and opportunities for social mobility. While the social capital of cleaning workers may be limited by their marginalization, these informal networks still play a crucial role in mitigating the negative effects of social exclusion and labor alienation.

4.4. The Role of Empowerment Initiatives in Social Integration

Table 2 Impact of Empowerment Initiatives on Worker Well-being.

Initiative	Social Engagement	Skill Development	Emotional Support	Community Belonging
Hongyan (Beijing)	High	Moderate	High	High
Green Rose (Shenzhen)	High	High	High	High
Local Community (no initiative)	Low	Low	Low	Moderate

One of the key areas of focus in this study was the role of empowerment initiatives, such as the “Hongyan” and “Green Rose” organizations, in promoting community belonging and social integration among cleaning workers. Table 2 shows the specific impacts of the “Hongyan” and “Green Rose” empowerment initiatives on worker well-being, based on interview responses. These initiatives provide workers with opportunities to participate in social and cultural activities, develop new skills, and advocate for their rights. The case study analysis revealed that these initiatives have had a positive impact on workers' sense of belonging, particularly in terms of reducing feelings of isolation and increasing social engagement.

For example, participants involved in the "Hongyan" initiative in Beijing reported that the organization gave them a sense of purpose beyond their daily cleaning duties. One worker stated, “Being part of Hongyan makes me feel like I’m part of something bigger. It’s not just about cleaning, it’s about being seen and heard.” Similarly, workers involved in the “Green Rose” initiative in Shenzhen highlighted the importance of the social networks they formed through the organization. As one participant noted, “Before Green Rose, I didn’t really know anyone outside of work. Now, I have friends, and we do things together outside of work.”

These findings suggest that empowerment initiatives can play a critical role in enhancing the social integration of migrant workers by providing them with spaces for social interaction and personal development. These initiatives not only offer material support but also foster a sense of community and belonging that is often lacking in formal urban environments.

4.5. Comparative Differences Between Urban Environments

The comparative analysis of cleaning workers’ experiences in Beijing, Shenzhen, and a local community revealed significant differences in their sense of belonging and social integration. Workers in Beijing reported the highest levels of social exclusion and alienation, which may be attributed to the city's size, density, and more rigid social hierarchies. In contrast, workers in Shenzhen described more positive interactions with residents and a slightly stronger sense of community engagement, likely due to the city's more inclusive attitude toward migrant workers. Meanwhile, workers in the local community reported feeling less alienated than their counterparts in Beijing and Shenzhen, possibly due to the smaller size of the community and the closer-knit social relationships that exist there.

These findings highlight the importance of local context in shaping workers' experiences of social inclusion and exclusion. While all three environments present challenges to community belonging, the specific social and structural factors at play in each region lead to different outcomes for migrant workers. This suggests that policies and initiatives aimed at improving the social integration of cleaning workers need to be tailored to the specific conditions of each urban environment.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm the significant challenges that cleaning workers face in urban environments, particularly with respect to social exclusion and labor alienation. As previous research has shown, migrant workers often find themselves marginalized in cities where they are physically present but socially invisible [1]. This study’s findings align with these observations, showing that cleaning workers in Beijing and Shenzhen, in particular, experience pronounced feelings of isolation and detachment. The workers reported a lack of meaningful social interactions with community members, which contributed to a sense of alienation.

This social exclusion is compounded by the nature of their work. For the cleaning workers in this study, their labor is repetitive, physically demanding, and largely unappreciated, leading to emotional detachment. The concept of "numbness" described by many participants in this study reflects the dehumanizing effects of alienated labor. This emotional detachment, which emerges from the repetitive and often invisible nature of their work, confirms Arendt’s idea that labor, when it lacks higher meaning or social recognition, becomes a survival-oriented activity devoid of personal fulfillment [3].

Furthermore, the study reveals that the structural barriers to community integration—such as exclusionary urban policies, lack of access to social services, and the transient nature of migrant work—reinforce the alienation experienced by cleaning workers. The participants' accounts suggest that these workers are often treated as “outsiders,” even after years of working in the same communities. These findings suggest that addressing the issue of labor alienation requires not only improving working conditions but also fostering greater social recognition of migrant workers' contributions to urban life.

One of the most promising findings of this study is the positive impact that empowerment initiatives, such as the “Hongyan” and “Green Rose” organizations, have on the social integration of cleaning workers. These initiatives provide workers with opportunities for social engagement, skill development, and advocacy, which help to mitigate some of the feelings of isolation and exclusion. As highlighted in the study, community-driven initiatives can play a crucial role in enhancing social integration by providing migrant workers with access to social capital and creating spaces for social participation.

The case studies of the “Hongyan” and “Green Rose” initiatives demonstrate that these organizations offer more than just material support—they provide workers with a sense of purpose and belonging. For many workers, participating in these initiatives gave them an opportunity to be seen and heard in ways that their daily work did not allow. These findings support the argument made by social theorists such as Bourdieu, who emphasized the importance of social capital in facilitating social mobility and integration [5]. By fostering connections among workers and creating networks of support, these initiatives help to reduce the social isolation that many migrant workers experience.

Moreover, these empowerment initiatives challenge the traditional view of cleaning workers as passive recipients of marginalization. Instead, they position workers as active agents who can advocate for their rights and build community ties. This shift in perspective is important because it highlights the potential for empowerment initiatives to reframe the narrative around migrant labor, moving from one of exclusion and invisibility to one of inclusion and agency. These findings have important implications for policymakers and community organizers, suggesting that similar initiatives should be expanded in other urban areas to improve the well-being and social integration of migrant workers.

While formal empowerment initiatives play an important role in improving social integration, this study also highlights the significance of informal social networks among cleaning workers. In the absence of formal social inclusion, many workers rely on their colleagues for emotional support and social interaction. These informal networks, formed through shared experiences of marginalization and labor, provide workers with a sense of solidarity and mutual assistance. As one participant noted, “We help each other out, even if it's just by talking during breaks.” Although cleaning workers may lack access to the formal networks of power and influence that are available to more privileged groups, their informal networks still offer valuable emotional and practical support.

However, while informal networks provide some degree of support, they cannot fully substitute for the social and economic benefits that come from formal community inclusion. The study found that workers who were involved in empowerment initiatives like “Hongyan” and “Green Rose” were more likely to feel integrated into the broader community than those who relied solely on informal networks. This suggests that while informal networks are crucial for coping with the immediate challenges of marginalization, formal structures are necessary to achieve lasting social integration.

The comparative analysis of cleaning workers in Beijing, Shenzhen, and a local community revealed notable differences in their experiences of social exclusion, labor alienation, and community belonging. Workers in Beijing reported the highest levels of social exclusion and detachment, a finding that may be linked to the city's size, density, and more hierarchical social structure. In contrast, workers in Shenzhen described slightly more positive interactions with residents and a stronger sense of community participation, possibly due to the city's reputation for

being more inclusive of migrant labor. These findings align with previous research that suggests smaller, more inclusive urban environments may be better equipped to foster social integration for migrant workers [6].

Interestingly, workers in the local community reported feeling less alienated than their counterparts in Beijing and Shenzhen, despite having fewer formal social support systems in place. This may be attributed to the smaller size of the local community, which allowed for closer-knit social relationships and more frequent interactions between workers and residents. These findings suggest that while formal policies and initiatives are important for promoting social inclusion, the local social environment also plays a critical role in shaping workers' experiences of community belonging. Policymakers should consider these local variations when designing programs to improve the social integration of migrant workers.

The findings of this study have several important implications for policy and practice. First, the issue of social exclusion among migrant workers, particularly those in low-wage sectors like cleaning, requires urgent attention. Policymakers should prioritize the creation of inclusive community environments that recognize the contributions of migrant workers and offer them opportunities for social participation. This could include creating formal spaces within communities where workers can interact with residents, participate in cultural activities, and access social services.

Second, the success of empowerment initiatives like "Hongyan" and "Green Rose" suggests that similar programs should be expanded in other cities. These initiatives not only improve workers' access to social capital but also enhance their sense of agency and belonging. Local governments and NGOs should invest in the development of such programs, ensuring that migrant workers have access to both material support and opportunities for social engagement.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of tailoring social integration efforts to the specific characteristics of different urban environments. While large cities like Beijing may require more formalized programs to address the challenges of social exclusion, smaller communities may benefit from less formal but more frequent interactions between workers and residents. Policymakers should take these local variations into account when designing interventions to promote the social integration of migrant workers.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the social experiences of cleaning workers in urban China, highlighting the challenges of social exclusion and labor alienation as well as the potential of empowerment initiatives to foster social integration. By comparing workers' experiences in Beijing, Shenzhen, and a local community, the research reveals important variations in the social dynamics of different urban environments and offers valuable insights for policymakers and community organizers. The findings suggest that addressing the issues faced by migrant workers requires both structural changes to urban policies and the development of community-driven initiatives that promote social inclusion and empowerment. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impact of these initiatives on the well-being and social integration of migrant workers, particularly as China's urbanization process continues to evolve.

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