Legitimate but “not for me”: The role of validation in migrant entrepreneur understanding of COVID-19 business support policies in Shanghai

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Abstract
COVID-19 pandemic destroyed lives and the global economy, and in the wake left businesses struggling to re-open in urban China. The Chinese party-state implemented fiscal reforms targeted towards small businesses, however little research has evaluated business’ understanding of policies and implementation, particular to the focus on rural migrant entrepreneurs. Therefore, we conducted an ethnographic case study including in-depth interviews to determine to what extent rural migrant micro-entrepreneurs understand and adopt COVID-19 business support policies at two retail markets in Shanghai amid a pandemic. Applying an inductive grounded theory approach, the data demonstrated participants believe policies are legitimate but not for me because I am getihu by myself. We maintain their understanding is a legacy of hukou and is confirmed through the theory of validation including recognition through agreement with significant others including other entrepreneurs and family; corroboration with life experiences in Shanghai; and resonance of their migration story as self-sufficient entrepreneurs surviving with their own capabilities. They have a degree of certainty their understanding is fact because it has been repeatedly validated through life experiences of a migrant lacking hukou in Shanghai. The study encourages consideration for the migrant entrepreneur context and has important practical implications for policymakers.
1 | INTRODUCTION

The cornerstone of public administration research is citizen satisfaction with government performance (James, 2007; Olsen, 2015). Within the context of China, scholars have surveyed regular Chinese citizens to gauge different performance measures and policy implementation (Huang & Yang, 2018; Yu & Ma, 2015), but little attention has been paid to entrepreneur perception of government performance (Tsai, 2007; Wang & Yu, 2017; Zhuang & Everett, 2017) and even less on the experience of rural migrant business owners (Liu et al., 2019). This is despite the fact that entrepreneurs contribute to economic development in cities (Chen & Feng, 2000; Liu & Huang, 2016) and are “stakeholders entitled to evaluate government performance” (Wang & Yu, 2017, p.701).

China’s transition to a market economy, compounded by globalization and decentralization, resulted in an encouraging institutional framework for entrepreneurship and innovation (He, 2016). It is argued that China’s transformation as the world’s second largest economy is in part to entrepreneurs (Chen & Feng, 2000), thus creating a demand for migrant labor force from the countryside (Zhu, 2007). All of which are considerably affected by the institutional landscape developed in the form of policy creation (He et al., 2019). Some studies have examined the impact of reforms on the Chinese entrepreneurial landscape by focusing on the financial system (Huang et al., 2016; Tsai, 2007), tax incentives (Liu et al., 2018), property rights (Lu & Tao, 2010), ownership structure (Welsh et al., 2017), and excessive government regulations (Wang, 2017). However, there is a lack of research on policies created to support Chinese businesses during a national crisis (Zhuang & Everett, 2017) and specific to the COVID-19 pandemic.

China’s economic development strategy has pushed entrepreneurship to the forefront, but the gap in knowledge of Chinese entrepreneurship ecosystems remains “stubbornly large” (Huang et al., 2019, p. 8). Entrepreneurship ecosystem has become the universal term to describe an entrepreneurial environment within a micro and macro context (Chen et al., 2020). Several studies maintain the urgency to determine if the institutional landscape is effective in supporting migrant business (Huang et al., 2019) and what are the major issues impeding business success (Liu et al., 2019). Further, scholars believe research should act now to study regional entrepreneurship ecosystems (Chen et al., 2020) and within the Chinese context (Su et al., 2015). Thus, a serious challenge for researchers has been to determine the extent of the Chinese institutional landscape in empowering rural migrant entrepreneurs in urban cities. Further, the voice of the rural migrant entrepreneur has been neglected, as prior studies have been limited to quantitative survey data (Liu et al., 2018; Wang & Yu, 2017).

The objective of our ethnographic case study is to analyze how rural migrant micro-entrepreneurs at two retail markets in Shanghai, understand and adopt business support policies meant to empower them to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we used ethnographic methods along with repeated in-depth interviews to obtain the data. Next, we used an inductive grounded theory approach (Gioia et al., 2013) to extract meaning from the data. Then we applied Glaeser’s (2010) theory of validation as a framework to understand participant perceptions towards pandemic policies and the extent of policy adoption. Finally, we argue the context of lacking hukou, produces a marginalized state (Wong et al., 2007), whereby participants rely on a self-sufficient mentality (Gleiss, 2016; Qian & Guo, 2019) to survive the pandemic, rejecting business support policies, further hindering policy implementation within the urban Chinese context.

In particular, participants believe such policies are legitimate but not for me because I am getihu by myself. We maintain this understanding is a legacy of hukou and is confirmed through the theory of validation: recognition through agreement with significant others including other entrepreneurs and family; corroboration with life experiences in Shanghai; and resonance of their migration story as self-sufficient entrepreneurs surviving with their own capabilities (Gleiss, 2016; Qian &
Guo, 2019). They have a degree of certainty their understanding is fact because it has been repeatedly validated through life data developed from high levels of trust cultivated over years studying this regional entrepreneurship ecosystem and our knowledge of relevant migration and entrepreneurship literature. To lay a foundation for our arguments, this paper is structured as follows: the first section outlines the literature analysis shaping the paper; second, we provide a background of the Chinese entrepreneurship ecosystem and the institutional landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic; third, we describe our research method; fourth, we present and discuss our empirical findings; and, finally, we conclude with policy implications, theoretical contribution and recommendations for future research.

1.1 Urban migration, hukou and entrepreneurship

The household registration system (hukou) is a state sanctioned spatial segregation created in the 1950s to divide the population between rural and urban citizens (Zhang et al., 2019). Hukou has brought vastly different life experiences for urban and rural citizens (Cheng et al., 2014). However, China has progressively reduced migration restrictions and rural migrants have migrated in unprecedented numbers to urban cities and few have achieved local hukou status (Zhang et al., 2019). Shanghai is one of the largest migration destinations (He et al., 2016) with rural migrants comprising 40% of the population (Shanghai Municipal Statistic Bureau, 2018). City wide, low-skill workers account for over two-thirds (68%) of total labor in 2017 (SMSB, 2018) and migrants come to Shanghai mostly for jobs that locals do not want (Stainback & Tang, 2019). Rural-urban migration was previously seen as a deviant behavior which allotted for social problems that the administration didn’t want to address (Gleiss, 2016). Ideas such as the floating population (Zhu, 2007) made popular policies to detain migrants lacking proper hukou (Davin, 2000), yet discourse has changed to see migrants as self-governing individuals responsible for their own welfare which contribute to the economy of urban cities (Gleiss, 2016).

China created an institutional landscape where local-hukou holders have access to the best life including better education (Tian, 2017), social welfare programs (Wang & Fan, 2012), housing subsidies (Zhang et al., 2016), minimum living allowances (Zhu, 2007), higher-paying jobs (Ou & Kondo, 2013) and education (Ma, 2020). Yue et al. (2013) maintain hukou suppresses rural migrants’ access to capital and keeps them in the underbelly working “low-paying 3-D (dirty, demanding and dangerous) jobs that urban residents eschew” (p. 1705). There is no question that rural migrants live a marginalized life in urban cities because of discrimination from urban citizens (Wong et al., 2007) and social disadvantages (Li et al., 2007), but there is growing evidence that this is decreasing because of access to affordable social welfare (Cheng et al., 2014).

Yet the aforementioned disadvantages are the push needed for self-employment (Liu & Huang, 2016). It isn’t an easy or even achievable road to prosperity and many workers never elevate their economic status (Yue et al., 2013), yet entrepreneurship provides a chance for economic success and social integration (Wang & Fan, 2012) which government officials espouse (Chen & Wang, 2015). Regardless of discipline, entrepreneurship is seen as a tool of economic empowerment as well as individual agency (Liu & Huang, 2016). Rindova et al. (2009) believe entrepreneuring is an operation of “doing” in that it has the power to influence socio-economic change within a context where poverty or marginalization restrict economic opportunities. Further, self-employment has been viewed as secure form of employment because it creates an ongoing relationship with self (Atherton & Newman, 2017; Stainback & Tang, 2019).
Self-employed Chinese migrants have a wage advantage compared to wage workers (Stainback & Tang, 2019) which can limit the structural inequalities provided by hukou (Liu et al., 2019). The Chinese government is not shy about their support of individually owned businesses and has considered the private sector essential for growth since the decentralization of 1978 (Chen et al., 2020). The importance of private business for job creation and economic recovery during a crisis has been well documented by past literature (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012) however, there is a need to better connect policy implementation with migrant entrepreneur understanding, especially during a pandemic crisis.

The literature amalgamates an image of institutional constraints which are commonly unsupportive of rural migrants living and working in urban cities. Specifically, entrepreneurship can provide an avenue for wealth creation and minimize marginalization, through self-empowerment. Both the act of entrepreneuring and lacking hukou can impact how migrants experience Shanghai on a daily basis, therefore, shaping or validating their understanding and knowledge of social and political life. Next, we turn to the theoretical framework of validation to support our argument that rural migrant micro-entrepreneur understanding of COVID-19 business support policies is predisposed by experiences and memories of a marginalized life, lacking hukou.

1.2 Understanding and theory of validation

Rural migrants experience a marginalized life when migrating to urban cities (Wang & Fan, 2012) and this experience influences how migrants perceive policies (Zhang, 2014). Political epistemology scholars want to know what citizens know, how they know it, and what leads them to reconsider their understanding of policies. This dynamic process is in line with Glaeser’s theory of validation (2010). He categorized three distinct forces of knowledge validation for social and political life: recognition, corroboration and resonance. Recognition includes our interactions with others in which we compare our understanding against theirs. We give authority only with those that we prescribe power and within a specific context. Recognizing authority figures in our lives happens within formal contexts such as employers and local officials, and informal contexts with friends and family. Corroboration is when we consider our actions as a relative success or failure, when reinforced by our individual explicit understanding of the world. Meaning, our understanding is validated through retrospect, collection of evidence or experiences accumulated through life. Glaeser (2010) argues that we faithfully believe our individual configuration of the world is “true” through corroboration. Lastly, resonance is reinforced by comparing understanding to our own knowledge, emotions, or even skillsets. Resonance is the force linking recognition and corroboration because it fully acknowledges a specific person’s lifetime experiences. Glaeser (2010) maintained our daily experiences, emotions and institutional discourse form or change our understandings of the world.

This theory is applicable in analyzing social and political life in urban cities like Shanghai, where market reforms have attracted millions of migrants in hope of a better life (Chiang et al., 2015). Tian (2017) applied Glaeser’s theory of validation to investigate migrant perception of education policies in Shanghai. She found immediate context of hukou and daily life experiences impact policy perception. We complement this existing study by examining rural migrant entrepreneurs’ understanding and adoption of business support policies meant to empower them to survive the COVID-19 pandemic in Shanghai. We extend this research by focusing on the methodological process of an interpretivist approach to an ethnographic case study, allowing voice to a previously unheard population of successful rural migrant micro-entrepreneurs. Before describing our methodological approach in detail, we first illustrate the Chinese entrepreneurship ecosystem and the context of COVID-19 business support policies.
2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Chinese entrepreneurship ecosystem in context

The entrepreneurship ecosystem in China has become of extreme importance since market reforms of 1978 (Chen et al., 2020). Currently, private entrepreneurs account for 60% of China’s GDP, 70% of innovation and 90% of new jobs (Zitelmann, 2019). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, China recognized the need for more self-employed citizens and simplified the registration procedures in 2014. Rates of business growth rapidly increased during this time and created a “churn in the economy” (Atherton & Newman, 2017). The State Council issued an opinion to further boost mass entrepreneurship and innovation by fueling innovative domestic potential and entrepreneurial ideas among the masses (The State Council, 2015). The State Council maintained that helping urban and migrant residents become business owners was an essential policy measure to reduce unemployment and achieve wealth. The document went further to say entrepreneurs allow “more people to get rich, promoting the adjustment of income distribution structure, and realizing the benign interactive development of innovation to support entrepreneurship to promote employment” (The State Council, 2015). On December 24, 2018, The State Premier specified micro and small when he said, “Intensified support for growth of the private sector, especially SMEs, helps enhance the internal dynamism of economic growth” (Yue, 2018).

Shanghai Municipal government has cultivated its own innovative entrepreneurial ecosystem through policy initiatives. Shanghai’s motto is:

*Better City, Better Life ... and remains committed on four target areas—service, manufacturing, shopping and culture. By 2035, Shanghai aims to become an excellent global and socialist modern metropolis, an international center for economics, finance, trade, shipping, technology and innovation, while retaining its humanistic and eco-friendly character.* (SMSB, 2018, p. 3)

In order to do this, the government has committed to developing new local brands, develop luxury manufacturing and improve local product quality. Local authorities are marketing “Red Culture”, by capitalizing on Shanghai’s history and culture. Shanghai is a thriving ecosystem boasting the highest GDP of 2.01 trillion yuan and over 1,428.44 trillion yuan in total transactions (SMSB, 2018), many coming from micro-enterprises at retail markets. Shanghai has a thriving indoor retail market culture targeting locals and foreigners alike, with locations around the city which embody the *Better City, Better Life* motto.

Micro-sized enterprise is a common designation developed by the China government to further quantify and support small businesses. Micro-enterprises are businesses with 20 employees or less and generating no more than 3 million yuan annually (Yue, 2011). Chinese businesses are commonly referred to MSME (micro, small and medium size enterprises) (Huang et al., 2019). Further, micro-entrepreneur is a term in grounded in entrepreneurship literature within the Chinese context (Huber et al., 2017; Wallis, 2015; Yue, 2011) and cited as an intended beneficiary of COVID-19 financial support policies (Ministry of Commerce of The People’s Republic of China, 2020). Therefore, we use entrepreneurship and self-employment (*getihu* in local dialect) interchangeably, as cited in current literature (Liu et al., 2019).

Cultivating the entrepreneurship ecosystem poses many challenges for urban cities in China (Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, 2017; Wang, 2017). Research has concluded that the life expectancy of a new business in China is less than three years and more than 70% do not survive the first year (Su et al., 2015). Perhaps the most detrimental to micro-enterprises is the difficulty in
receiving bank loans (Liu & Huang, 2016; Tsai, 2007). Financing is often denied because of dual misunderstanding of micro-enterprise creditworthiness from the bank and the entrepreneur. It is even more important in today’s economic and health crisis, to determine the best policies to help existing micro-enterprises in Shanghai.

2.2 COVID-19 business support policies

Post-pandemic China was in an economic standstill which the World Bank (2020) projected China’s GDP growth of only 2.3%. In order to create a lasting recovery, there was a need for immediate action to protect household businesses. The central and Shanghai Municipal governments countered the economic downturn with several policies backed by public money with the focus on the microeconomic level (Zhang, 2020). The Ministry of Commerce released a report stressing that individual entrepreneurs should not be left out.

Individual industrial and commercial households play an important role in prospering the market economy, expanding social employment, facilitating people’s lives, and maintaining social harmony and stability. (MCPRC, 2020).

This pandemic recovery plan is endorsed by General Secretary Xi Jinping and in accordance with the Party Central Committee and the State Council (MCPRC, 2020). Policies in Appendix A are sourced from publicly available documents on official government websites between February and April 2020 and pertain to micro-entrepreneurs in Shanghai. Table 1 includes a simplified list of policies that were translated and distributed to participants in the study.

Given the above issues, there are a group of rural migrants who call themselves getihu (self-employed) that are systemically neglected with resources and opportunities (Wong et al., 2007). Exploring rural migrant micro-entrepreneurs’ understanding is vital to create and implement policies which include all citizens through addressing life experiences and their immediate context (Tian, 2017). For these reasons, we feel it is imperative to give voice to the rural migrant micro-entrepreneur within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Constructing a framework

Similar to previous exploratory studies on the entrepreneur experience, researchers chose an interpretivist paradigm (Al-Dajani et al., 2015). This was in conjunction with ethnographic methods collected over four years (2016–2020), which allowed the lead researcher to study the migrant micro-entrepreneur lived experience and created a foundation of trust. Ethnographic case studies have been used to build and test theories about sociocultural phenomena (Schwandt & Gates, 2018) with an extended duration (O’Riain, 2009). The crux of ethnographic case studies is sharing the same context with participants in regard to time and space (O’Riain, 2009) and relying on field notes and observation for data. We supplemented this collection method with repeated in-depth interviews with a purposeful sample of participants that could provide us with rich data through their experience with the phenomena (Tracy, 2013). We then applied an adapted grounded theory approach which provided contextualization of participant understanding and behaviors associate with business support policies.
3.2 | Data collection

Fieldwork for this case study was collected from two indoor markets located within the Changning district of Shanghai: International Pearl City and Datong Yang. These markets were selected for four reasons. The markets embody the Shanghai motto, Better City, Better Life by incorporating shopping, local brand names and China’s “red culture” (SMSB, 2018) within one building. The markets are comprised of mostly rural migrant entrepreneurs which provided ease of access to participants. Lastly, a majority of the entrepreneurs speak English and cater to foreign customers.

The lead researcher recruited English speaking migrants through relationships cultivated over four years at Pearl City. The participants were approached, informed about the study, invited to collaborate and given guarantees of confidentiality. Participants were asked to sign consent forms and were provided a copy in both English and Mandarin. Pearl City participants connected researchers with during the pandemic. Lastly, organizing and linking codes with Glaeser’s theory of validation allowed a structured framework to better explain the phenomena.

### Table 1 COVID-19 business support policies targeting micro-entrepreneurs

| 1. | All work resumes. (Restrictions have been lifted to resume all work and production as well as guaranteeing labor and logistic needs for business usual) |
| 2. | Tax reduction and exemption. (Commissioned withholding and collection of taxes postponed until May 30) |
| 3. | Reduced rent. (Landlords are encouraged to remove rent February & March; state-owned landlords must exempt two months’ rent) |
| 4. | Retail business license & registration. (Application process has been simplified and self-employed people are exempt from registration of new venues or expansion) |
| 5. | Associations and social organizations. (Federation of industry and commerce and the individual workers association are given priority to solve legal problems) |
| 6. | Online commerce Platforms. (Reduced service fees of internet platforms and increased online support for small businesses) |
| 7. | New loans and credit. (300 billion RMB in low-interest loans for household businesses, local banks have simplified loan approval procedures, increased credit, dropped finance rate to 0.5% per year, and prolonged repayment period) |
| 8. | Existing loans & credit. (Current loan interest repayments are extended to June 30 and no penalties accrued to loan repayments specifically for entrepreneurs in retail) |
| 9. | Employee Contributions. (Employee social security payments are postponed; employee medical insurance premiums are lowered by 0.5% in 2020; social insurance payment has been adjusted from April to July) |
| 10. | Unemployment. (The monthly unemployment subsidy has been doubled including migrant workers’ temporary living allowances; Shanghai authorities will refund 50% of unemployment insurance premiums paid in previous year to qualified employers) |

Note: Wu (2020), JieFang Daily (2020), CBIRC (2020), State Administration of Taxation (2020), China Government Network (2020), MCPRC (2020), Zhang, 2020.
### TABLE 2  
Field notes: all participants are coded for privacy

| #  | Interviewee | Market | Age | Province | Gender | Product type                                           | Survival | Business years in Shanghai |
|----|-------------|--------|-----|----------|--------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------|---------------------------|
| 1  | 20201       | (PC)   | 43  | Jiangsu  | Female | Original tailor-made clothing & uniforms               | Open    | 10 years                  |
| 2  | 20202       | (PC)   | 46  | Hunan    | Female | *Shanzhai* bags, shoes, watches                        | Open    | 10 years                  |
| 3  | 20203       | (PC)   | 25  | Anhui    | Female | Children's toys, jewelry, some clothing, *shanzhai* bags | Closed 9/1/20 | 3 years                 |
| 4  | 20204       | (PC)   | 45  | Jiangxi  | Female | Fashion designer, & cashmere clothing                  | Open    | 7 years                   |
| 5  | 20205       | (PC)   | 39  | Anhui    | Female | *Shanzhai* watches, bags, clothing                      | Open    | 10 years                  |
| 6  | 20206       | (PC)   | 29  | Anhui    | Female | *Shanzhai* clothing                                   | Closed 7/30/20 | 4 years                |
| 7  | 20207       | (PC)   | 39  | Anhui    | Female | Leather bags & belts                                   | Open    | 18 years                  |
| 8  | 20208       | (PC)   | 38  | Jiangsu  | Female | Fashion designer                                       | Open    | 3 years                   |
| 9  | 20209       | (PC)   | 38  | Zhejiang | Female | Jewelry designer and wholesale                          | Open    | 16 years                  |
| 10 | 202010      | (DY)   | 26  | Heilongjiang | Female | Women’s boutique, apparel & accessories               | Closed 7/30/20 | 1 year                |
| 11 | 202011      | (DY)   | 30  | Jiangxi  | Male    | Women’s boutique, apparel & accessories               | Open    | 7 years                   |
| 12 | 202012      | (DY)   | 36  | Zhejiang | Male    | Handbag designer with factory, Fine leather goods      | Open    | 17 years                  |

*Note:* *Shanzhai* – fake designer brands.

*Abbreviations*: DY, Datong Yang; PC, Pearl City.
colleagues at Datong Yang through snowball sampling methods, which provided an additional layer of trust. This method is a good tool to use when accessing difficult to reach or marginalized populations (Noy, 2007). This sampling approach was effective in securing commitment from 17 migrant micro-entrepreneurs; however, 12 were included in the data analysis. Five interviews were eliminated because of the quality of language and the cross-cultural policy communication was poor. The theoretically relevant sample included 12 interviews with English-speaking migrant micro-entrepreneurs. Field notes included in Table 2.

Initial interviews were conducted within the pandemic market setting and lasted between 45 min and two hours. During the interviews important themes emerged, thus evolving the methods to include thematic interview protocols. Participants were interviewed several times over the course of five months as a method to fact-check themes that were revealed during the initial interviews. Interview topics included reasons for migration, current and future business environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, goals as an entrepreneur, perceptions of business support policies, channels for information gathering, current life situation, interactions with other getihu, locals, and officials etc. Because of the trust-based relationships, participants spoke freely. Similar to previous research on “everyday experiences” of entrepreneurs (Steyaert & Katz, 2004), the interviews provide voice to rural migrant entrepreneurs as they perceive, understand, and negotiate support policies and the immediate business environment amidst the pandemic.

Challenges for data collection included potential systematic bias in the type of entrepreneur willing to participate. Authors relied on English-speaking respondents, which may be more confident and less busy than those who refuse. A more serious bias may be the fact there are more women than men entrepreneurs at the markets. However, this is a capstone of the research and allows for a gendered discussion of business that has been previously neglected from migration research (Welsh et al., 2017). People exaggerate, forget or even misunderstand. Research must account for this in personal interviews. Therefore, ethnographic methods were conducted prior to the interviews. Author had regular conversations in person and on social media over a 4-year period with four of the participants which allowed an understanding of their attitudes toward a variety of subjects. None of these potential sampling biases have serious implications for the arguments made in the paper. The results are not intended to generalize all rural migrant entrepreneurs living in urban Chinese cities, but to describe the changes happening within one regional ecosystem in Shanghai, during a pandemic.

3.3 Data analysis

Considering the interpretivist paradigm of an ethnographic case study, analysis and data collection happened instantaneously by attempting to examine the world from the participant’s viewpoint (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process is common when in conjunction with in-depth interviews over a period of time (Chowdhury, 2014) and in line with Wilhelm Dilthey’s “verstehen” where social science must be studied from the actor’s viewpoint and with empathic insight (Tracy, 2013). Further, we structured the analysis using a grounded theory methodology (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) whereby, we scientifically examined the data in three stages by using codes to manually structure the data, provide meaning through identification of first-order categories and eventually, second-order themes. First, the process of repeated coding and comparison led to regular patterns in which we formulated a tentative hypothesis that we further explored throughout the interview process until we developed a framework. Next, we compared this to existing literature in public administration, social-psychology and entrepreneurship. Lastly, codes were cross-checked with research participants for accuracy. Triangulation of the data highlighted eleven first-order categories which later produced three
second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013). When possible, the categories and themes kept the original words used by the participants to preserve the Chinese context and language (Gioia et al., 2013). Participants in the study preferred to be called getihu which was spoken with pride and signifies a self-employed entrepreneur. Such conversations increased the reliability of our findings and allowed for an authentic documentation of the rural migrant entrepreneur experience (Al-Dajani et al., 2015).

The value of interpretative analysis is dependent on the research team’s insight and capability to link data to a broader socio-historical context (Tracy, 2013). Our ability to write the story of the rural migrant micro-entrepreneur is based on the authors’ complementary strengths as researchers. The research team is comprised of a Chinese academic with knowledge and experience of public administration, organizational behavior and human resource management, as well as an American academic with a background in entrepreneurship practice, gender research and international development. Together, the team tested a wide range of theories and discourses from literature when interpreting and analyzing emerging themes. Because of the dual (insider and outsider) perspectives on Chinese culture, the discussions were thorough regarding themes to pursue and those to relinquish as it relates to migrant entrepreneur understanding of business support policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 3 represents selected examples of raw data, first-order categories and second-order themes which illustrate underlying mechanisms of rural migrant micro-entrepreneur understanding of COVID-19 business support policies in Shanghai.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within this section, we present and discuss the results against the theoretical framework of validation (Glaeser, 2010) to examine the process and mechanism of knowledge formation about COVID-19 business support policies as it relates to their migrant life experiences in Shanghai. As seen in Table 3, our data was coded into three second-order themes (T1) *Legitimate* but (T2) *not for me* because (T3) *I am getihu by myself*, and eleven first-order categories (C1–C11). We argue their understanding and attitudes toward COVID-19 business support policies are validated by three engagements with the world: *recognition* of views by significant others, *corroboration* of these views by life experiences in Shanghai, and *resonance* of their migration experience (Glaeser, 2010).

4.1 Recognition by authority figures: (T1) legitimate

Male and female getihu were resolute that policies were (T1) *legitimate*, but not designed for their type of business and further, they recount being self-employed and self-reliant entrepreneurs without the aid of government measures. To investigate the foundation of their knowledge formation, it is essential to first identify authority figures which confirm or deny their understanding of policy legitimacy. Glaeser (2010) maintains that recognition includes our interactions with significant others within formal and informal relationships, whereby we compare our understanding against theirs. This study recognized significant authority figures within two contexts: formal (market managers and landlords) and informal (other getihu and husbands). The formal and informal authority figures believe policies aren’t for micro-entrepreneurs, which verify their existing beliefs. Yet, within this context, state-owned actors (banks and mass media) are considered insignificant authority figures because participants do not recognize their understanding as truth. This is despite receiving calls from banks and government officials offering fiscal and monetary policies to support their businesses.
| Second-order themes | First-order categories | Examples of raw data                                                                 |
|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| T1                  | C1                     | “Policies are for all Chinese. Maybe some don’t get benefits because their business is too small. I already received two months free rent. I will receive four months free rent by the end of 2020. I pay for three and get two free. I have already received a business tax reduction for February and March and reduced retail business license. The bank is always calling me on my phone asking if I need money or credit. I always tell them no. I can’t afford the interest.” (Interviewee 20209) |
|                     | C2                     | “Business is not good. Zero business. No customers. No Korean, Japanese, European … no one coming. No business. All dead. You are the only person (here) today. No people coming … I die. It’s been 8–9 months with no customers. I have no plan for next year. No new business. I don’t know what I will do (and begins to cry) … China life here not easy. Last year’s sales were about 200,000 RMB, but I still lost 58,000 RMB for parents doctor, kid’s education, house. I pay for everything on my Chinese credit (cards).” (Interviewee 202012) |
|                     | C3                     | “I don’t know of these policies. I didn’t get free rent. I will not get any help from the government.” (Interviewee 202010) |
|                     | C4                     | “We all know of these policies, but we don’t know how to get them. I am hopeful to get these, especially tax reduction and reduced rent, but I don’t know how. No associations have helped me or other getihu… We don’t try so I don’t know.” (Interviewee 20207) |
|                     | C5                     | “These laws don’t apply to me. I am self-employed, not state-run.” (Interview 20,203) |
|                     |                        | “I know all these policies. They are for government businesses, not me. I have not received free rent.” (Interviewee 202012) |

(Continues)
| Second-order themes | First-order categories | Examples of raw data |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| C6                  | “My business is too small” | “I will get two months free rent, but I really want reduced taxes. Don’t know how and most policies aren’t for me. My business is too small. What can the government do for me? They can’t help me.” (Interviewee 20206) “This list (referring to policies) is not for me. I got two months free rent, but my landlord will not allow any more than that. My business is too small to receive tax back. I have no need for loans or credit because I used my saved money. I am not a member of any social organizations. Policies don’t benefit small shops because small shops pay zero tax. Most of us pay the minimum insurance policy or nothing at all. The government reduced insurance a lot, but many don’t pay.” (Interviewee 20208) |
| C7                  | “I don’t use banks” | “Banks message me every week. They want to give me 50,000–300,000 RMB, but I don’t want. Even if I have 300,000 RMB, how will I make money? China has 23 million (people) but no people here. Do you see anyone?” (Interviewee 202012) “We saved all our money. We don’t use banks. What would I do with the money now? No customers. No business. I do not get messages from banks.” (Interviewee 20201) |
| C8                  | “We are not poor” | “The government can’t help us. We must do it ourselves (market getihu). Government can help poor people. We are not poor.” (Interviewee 20207) “Chinese sellers are okay because we keep a lot of money in the bank. We will get nothing from the government because we are not really poor. Government pays us nothing. No help.” (Interviewee 20204) |
| T3                  | “I am getihu by myself” | “This year, China is crazy. Every job is too bad. For the getihu the government does nothing. I am getihu by myself.” (Interviewee 20201) “I learned English by myself. It’s not easy actually. I had money saved from working for big business in law. I thought, let me see what I can do in three years. I taught myself with books how to make clothes. I learned the machine when I was young. Now, I read how to cut, how to measure. I try my best to increase technique and knowledge. I get better each year. I do it by myself.” (Interviewee 20208) “I have three businesses in Shanghai. My dad is an entrepreneur and I help him run a family shoe business and a chocolate factory. If you are a good businessman, the virus is good for you. You have to make changes and adapt. I do not expect to see a profit for at least one year, but I had to act now to get this street location. It was vacant and little rent and taxes. (He opened five days before the interview).” (Interviewee 202011) |
Getihu depend on landlords and market managers as formal authority figures as sources of policy information. Both have acquired power and economic status (Su, 2018), and micro-entrepreneurs are often at their mercy for additional fees, increased rent and taxes. Both have become agents in confirming or denying the legitimacy of policies rolled out from the local and central governments (Su, 2018). Within this study, there is lack of policy discourse between market managers, landlords and their tenants. During the study, only 59% of participants had received free or reduced rent as suggested by local authorities. In the interviews, a few getihu admitted it wasn’t the manager’s responsibility, “The market manager doesn’t know how to help. He takes care of rent and electricity, not benefits.” (Interviewee 20207). Yet, another acknowledged that “Market manager tell us about some policies” (Interviewee 20206). While in DaTong Yang, the market manager is known for withholding information, “Sometimes, the boss has a secret and doesn’t want to share. Everyone pays one year rent in this market” (Interviewee 202010). Further, her belief that all getihu paid one year rent in full, was confirmed false by other getihu. Pearl City market manager and landlords seemed to be more supportive and provided up to four months free rent.

Although most participants believed policies were not for me (as discussed in the next section), they did consider policies as (T1) legitimate. This is because policies are perceived as (C1) fair or justified and (C2) getihu are operating in a desperate environment where support is needed. Several participants stated satisfaction with two months free rent and reduced business taxes. Further, local officials legitimize business support policies by calling entrepreneurs to offer incentives. One participant expressed appreciation for a personal call from a local official despite the official not being able to improve her immediate business environment.

Local government called my business and said, “what help do you need?”. I told him I wanted free rent. He said he was sorry, but he couldn’t help with that. It made me feel good that local government cares. (Interviewee 20209)
Several getihu received calls by state-owned bank officers, offering low interest loans and credit. However, there was a unanimous agreement from getihu that borrowed money was a bad idea which supports previous research on micro-entrepreneurs (Tsai, 2007; Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs, 2017). Several male and female getihu expressed frustration with officials carelessly offering bank loans while the business environment is abandoned by customers. Even if they were to take a loan at a favorable interest rate, they cannot conceive a way to pay it back in the foreseeable future. Participant understanding shows a clear disconnect between the micro-entrepreneur context and policy design. This suggests the local government is unaware of their immediate needs as business owners, which inspires frustration and an understanding of self-sufficiency. The below statement justifies contextual considerations in policy implementation.

Banks message me every week. They want to give me 50,000‒300,000 RMB, but I don’t want. Even if I have 300,000 RMB, how will I make money? China has 23 million (people) but no people here. Do you see anyone? (Interviewee 202012)

This study shows there is little knowledge of the existence of support policies and without aid of business associations, there is little recourse for micro-entrepreneurs to access information. Business associations in China communicate policy information directly to its members and mostly focus on large private entrepreneurs (Unger & Chan, 2014). Further, Dai et al. (2020) found that Chinese entrepreneurs with previous work experience within the government are more likely to stay aware of business support policies which will improve firm performance. None of participants had government work experience, were members of business associations nor had cultivated guanxi with location officials (Su, Xie, et al., 2015). Most information comes from other getihu in the markets and mostly relates to rent reductions. The statement below expresses both (C3) lack of policy knowledge and (C4) unsure how to access policies.

We all know of these policies, but we don’t know how to get them. I am hopeful to get these, especially tax reduction and reduced rent, but I don’t know how. No associations have helped me or other getihu… We don’t try so I don’t know. (Interviewee 20207)

The information being shared between market getihu is mostly misinformation about the longevity or exclusivity of free rent or false information about the intended beneficiary of policies. The getihu market relationships are significant due to mutual respect and the shared life experience as migrant entrepreneurs. All have faced rural to urban migration and share an interest in improving their life situation and family’s opportunities. The longer the getihu tenure in the market, the more respect earned. Most getihu work twelve-hour days which allows for ample time to discuss life experiences as well as business. Interviewee 20201 said, “We see our market neighbors every day. We live together. We share everything together.” Further, a fashion designer of three years confirmed “A source of information is my shop neighbors. Many have been here more than 10 years. They talk. I listen. Also, the internet like Baidu” (Interviewee 20208). These findings support research on new generation migrants that create friendships with fellow colleagues which surpass neighborhood ties (Chen & Wang, 2015). However, relying on fellow getihu as sources of authority keep migrant micro-entrepreneurs from trying for policy benefits in a desperate business environment.

Finally, it is important to note that a majority of female participants were married with husbands working to support the business. Women themselves run the business by performing the daily operations of selling, designing, buying. Husbands work behind the scenes with suppliers and delivery logistics, performing tasks at their wife’s command. Many women getihu profess to looking to their husbands for policy advice and knowledge. A successful tailor said, “my husband’s business friends from other markets tell him the news about business incentives and tax breaks. His getihu friends”
(Interviewee 20201). This statement alludes to other *getihu*, but we must examine the source of information, her husband. This was a shared sentiment, “I hear from market friends or from my husband. He is my partner and keeps up with benefits” (Interviewee 20207). This is an informal and powerful relationship of knowledge validation. Literature supports women entrepreneurs looking to their husbands for business advice (Wolf & Frese, 2018).

Formal and informal authority figures in participants’ lives have validated their preexisting belief that COVID-19 business support policies are legitimate, but not designed for migrant micro-entrepreneurs. Further, since participants do not recognize state-owned agencies as valid sources of information, they disregard the shared knowledge. In the following section, we will analyze the validation of the remaining second-order themes (2) *not for me* because (3) *I am getihu by myself*.

### 4.2 Corroboration by life experiences: (T2) “Not for me”

*Getihu* use corroboration as a type of validation in which they understand through retrospect, accumulating life experiences in Shanghai. Participants faithfully believe their individual configuration of the world is “true” because they are influenced by what they feel, hear and observe while living in Shanghai (Tian, 2017). Although *getihu* feel policies are legitimately needed to support their business during the pandemic, participants do not consider themselves as intended beneficiaries.

As mentioned, *getihu* believe policies are *(T2)* not for me. First-order categories that emerged from the data was the *(C3)* lack of knowledge, which is compounded by being *(C4)* unsure how to access. Another category corroborating their understanding is the belief that policies are *(C5)* intended for state-owned businesses. Hence, “These laws don’t apply to me. I am self-employed, not state-run.” (Interviewee 20203). When questioned about this belief, three *getihu* became resolute that it was fact and said “We all know this… They are for government business, not me” (Interviewee 202012). They held strong to this belief and would not consider further discussion. Chinese citizens remember the preferential treatment allowed to state-owned businesses through additional policy and financial support (Yu, 2014).

Further, *(C6)* “My business is too small” was a misconception that policies are designed to help large businesses with several employees. “These policy good for big companies. But not me. I am not big” (Interviewee 20201). Interviewee 20209 is a successful jewelry designer with average yearly sales of 250,000 RMB. She has been in business for 16 years and did so without the aid of bank loans. Her business has survived the COVID-19 pandemic by changing her business model to become a wholesale supplier to smaller boutiques on Nanjing Lu. She believed policies are for all Chinese entrepreneurs regardless of hukou status, but she does not believe they are for small businesses. This is despite the State Council’s specific inclusion of “micro enterprises” in policy rhetoric (China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, 2020). There is a clear legitimacy in the eyes of *getihu* that fiscal policies are *(T2)* not for me.

I already received two months free rent. I will receive four months free rent by the end of 2020. I pay for three and get two free. I have already received a business tax reduction for February and March and reduced retail business license. The bank is always calling me on my phone asking if I need money or credit. I always tell them no. I can’t afford the interest. (Interviewee 20209)

Next, migrant *getihu* attitude towards policies are directly connected to their apathy towards formal bank loans and credit *(C7)* “I don’t use banks”. Similar to previous studies, micro-entrepreneurs look to informal sources such as retained earnings, interpersonal lending from family, underground finance
networks and trade credit (Tsai, 2007; MIWE, 2017; Liu & Huang, 2016). Thus, we emphasize the need to consider context when creating fiscal policies which will benefit all citizens including migrant micro-entrepreneurs.

I would never go to bank and ask for help. It must be a do-it-yourself attitude. I never get help, but one year with not job is okay. Life goes on. We save. Unemployment payments don’t work for us, we are getihu. Only free rent and reduced taxes will help us. The others don’t matter. I will try for online commerce platforms in the future. Not now, no customers. (Interviewee 20207)

A common thread in interviews was the fact that getihu believe (C8) “we are not poor” and have money saved in the bank. Participants believe that COVID-19 pandemic support policies are for local Shanghainese poor, but not themselves. Since moving to Shanghai, their businesses have flourished which has increased their life situation (Liu et al., 2018). Their capital accumulation since moving to Shanghai is evidence needed to corroborate their beliefs.

Chinese sellers are okay because we keep a lot of money in the bank. We will get nothing from the government because we are not really poor. Government pays us nothing. No help…. All of my family has moved to Shanghai. My parents, my husband’s parents. I help pay their rent. (Interviewee 20204)

Although, getihu profess to having money saved in the bank, many are in a desperate situation because of the pandemic. Since the outbreak, Chinese consumer spending is down, and retailers are struggling to open their doors (Leng, 2020). This is doubled with the lack of foreign customers because China’s border closed to non-Chinese visa holders for a four-month period beginning on March 28, 2020 (Zhang, 2021). Emotions are exasperated because on top of their vulnerable status as a transient, marginalized population, the micro-entrepreneurs are highly dependent on the commercial economy. Getihu can’t move their inventory because the markets are empty of customers, but they are still required to pay rent, electricity and taxes. This leaves getihu (C2) desperate for state support, but not expecting it and unsure how to ask for help.

Business is not good. Zero business. No customers. No Korean, Japanese, European… no one coming. No business. All dead. You are the only person today. No people coming… I die. It’s been 8-9 months with no customers. I have no plan for next year. No new business. I don’t know what I will do (and begins to cry) …. China life here not easy. Last year’s sales were about 200,000 RMB, but I still lost 58,000 RMB for parents doctor, kid’s education, house. I pay for everything on my Chinese credit (cards). (Interviewee 202012)

The corroboration of what migrant micro-entrepreneurs feel, hear and observe while living in Shanghai, has influenced the perception that business support policies designed to empower them to survive the pandemic, are actually irrelevant to their life situation as migrants and they alone are responsible for their business’ survival in Shanghai.

4.3 | Resonance of knowledge: (T3) “I am Getihu by myself”

Resonance is the third process of validation which places our understanding within context to our knowledge, emotions and skillset. All getihu in the study have rural hukou and life experiences prior to
migrating to Shanghai (Tian, 2017). They have experienced institutionalized marginalization as well as discrimination from locals (Canello, 2016). However, entrepreneurship has given them a unique opportunity to improve their life situation and overall wellbeing (Liu & Huang, 2016). Remembering their migration story of being a self-sufficient entrepreneur surviving with their own capabilities, validates their belief (T3) I am getihu by myself.

During the start of our relationship with Interviewee 20201, she spoke with optimism and light-hearted confidence that her business situation would improve, but throughout the study, she became more desperate. She said in anger, “This year, China is crazy. Every job is too bad. For getihu, the government does nothing. I am getihu by myself!” she says in exasperation and began to weep. Many interviewees were proud of the word getihu because it means self-employed. They wore the word as a badge of pride or (C9) self-sufficiency. This finding supports previous research on migrant workers who postulate a diligent self-reliant worker identity, creating their own destiny, autonomous of government welfare programs, yet contributing to the neoliberal commercial economy (Qian & Guo, 2019). Juxtaposition, their Shanghainese counterparts look to socialist welfare programs when laid off, which can be seen as an obstacle for development and recovery from the pandemic. Meanwhile, authorities see migrants to have the ability to become self-sufficient even entrepreneurial, which is promoted from modern socialist market economy (Gleiss, 2016). However, this can be an isolating existence for migrant entrepreneurs who are unsure how to access policy incentives provided by the local government (Wang & Yu, 2017). Further, hukou aims to restrict migration, yet our participants still migrate to Shanghai because of an opportunity for a better life (Chiang et al., 2015). Our research supports the idea that hukou reforms will continue to lose power as an institutional control (Wu et al., 2019).

In large cities like Shanghai, migrant life leaves much to be desired in regard to work, pay, housing and welfare opportunities, therefore, migrants become self-employed to alleviate their economic and social status (Liu & Huang, 2016). Getihu teach themselves business skills, how to negotiate with customers and authorities alike, all without the guanxi afforded to local hukou holders (Su, Xie, et al., 2015). Further, many have moved their entire families to Shanghai to live in homes purchased with income saved from their businesses, not from bank loans (Liu & Huang, 2016). Having achieved such accomplishments and without the assistance of Shanghai-based government entities, is a badge of (C10) pride. Similar to previous studies (Riley, 2013; Wang & Fan, 2012) all interviewed believe their quality of life has improved since moving to Shanghai, despite the current challenges in the business environment.

I am from Yangzhou, but we lived in Shenzhen before this. We keep moving to better city. A friend suggested I go to Shanghai and set up at the Fabric Market on South Bund. We were there five years but rent too high. I have been Pearl City for 10 years. Shanghai is the biggest city in China, and when we were young (referring to her husband), I wanted the best life. I thought, if I don’t make it here, I can just move back home …. My husband and I moved here first. Then my son. Then my parents and husband’s parents. I do not want to go back home. I love Shanghai. Shanghai is better than everyone’s home. Here you can shop, so many options. I bought a house here, but nobody knows that. (Interviewee 20201)

Their past experiences as a successful migrant entrepreneur brings out (C10) pride in their accomplishments. Many interviewees dropped out of school and started working in their family retail business. They are self-taught men and women through real world business experiences of trial and error. They saved their own money or borrowed from family which elevated them from needing the help of formal bank loans (Tsai, 2007). This group is incredibly proud of their ability to learn, adapt and do-it-yourself. These
findings are consistent with Riley’s (2013) research on migrant women worker in urban Dalian, whereby, success is defined by escaping their village life by living and working in urban Shanghai, regardless of migrant marginal status. The urban environment provided new resources and materials to formulate their businesses which support a city identity and lifestyle of success. Further, like Yue et al. (2013), participants moved to Shanghai with resources in the form of economic, social and cultural capital, which allow advantages in their social and political lives.

I learned English by myself. It’s not easy actually. I had money saved from working for big business in law. I thought, let me see what I can do in three years. I taught myself with books how to make clothes. I learned the machine when I was young. Now, I read how to cut, how to measure. I try my best to increase technique and knowledge. I get better each year. I do it by myself. (Interviewee 20208)

The below statement capitalizes on the (C10) pride expressed and confirmed through life experiences as a micro-entrepreneur creating strong businesses and eventually buying a house in Shanghai. Song and Zhang (2020) provide evidence of the tenacity of rural-urban migrants who pay the high housing cost, while juggling the negative impact of exclusive urban welfare programs. Our data supports research (Mohabir et al., 2017) that rural migrants stay in urban centers cities despite financial difficulties induced by economic downturns and regardless of government support measures.

All of my family has moved to Shanghai. My parents, my husband’s parents. I help pay their rent. Everyone is staying in Shanghai. No one will go home. We are strong. (Interviewee 20204)

The final theme of (T3) I am getihu by myself is the concept of (C11) business survival. Getihu are getting creative and cutting costs wherever possible. As a last resort, many have started selling knockoff (shanzhai) merchandise, diversifying the product assortment and switching to a local Chinese clientele. Shanzhai fashion is the designing or selling of counterfeit products. Liao (2017) found that many women entrepreneurs sell shanghai through digital platforms and to local Chinese consumers. A literal translation of shanzhai means “fortified mountain village” indicating a culture of risk-taking and adventure into the unknown. Shanzhai products are a last resort for our getihu participants because they have run out of ideas and they feel there is no one to turn to but themselves, hence “Of course I want to help, but what can government do for me?” (Interviewee 202007).

My children have to eat. I will sell bags below cost, just tell your friends to come and shop …. Since the borders closed, I am forced to sell my goods and start fresh. New inventory and new customers (local Chinese). (Interviewee 20205)

Another business strategy of (C11) business survival is selling merchandise online to Chinese customers while temporarily closing the market store location (Interviewee 20204 & 20207). Since the pandemic, the central government pushed private entrepreneurs towards digitizing their retail model to include Internet+ (National Development and Reform Commission, 2020). The policies aim to encourage mobile transactions and services to expand modes of retail operation through a reduction in platform service feeds and online support (MCPRC, 2020). Although, participants were unaware of such policies, they are resorting to mixed online and offline retail platforms for business survival. This will require entrepreneurs to learn new digital technology and perhaps fuel shanzhai culture as a precarious creativity which operates in the marginally legal retail sector (Liao, 2017).
Within our study, there were two (C11) business survival strategies that involved closing the market store location: one was using WeChat to sell remaining merchandise while looking for a new job in Shanghai; second was to temporarily move home to wait out the weak economy while leaving merchandise locked in the market. Since the pandemic, it is common to see shiny leather merchandise through locked doors or even clothing in windows grown dirty over months of solitude. Most will survive on money saved, despite not knowing if the situation will improve. The notion of self-sufficient survival is a legacy of their migration experience and further reinforces policies are inconsequential to their experience. Our data supports the notion that migrant entrepreneurs adapted or adjusted to urban political economy through diverse self-reliant initiatives, rather than question the legitimacy of business support policies (Gleiss, 2016; Qian & Guo, 2019).

My sister just went back home. She will stay there until business is good again. Her Tommy Bahama clothing is still there. Just sitting. I can’t say if I will stay or leave. No money right now. (Interviewee 20202)

I have to sell everything… I can’t take this merchandise with me on the train to my home village. It has to go. I must go back home with my baby for a while. I will sell food there. Everyone must eat, but they don’t need sunglasses. In two years, if economy good, I come back. (Interviewee 20203)

5 | POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study identified rural migrant micro-entrepreneur understanding and attitude towards business support policies will ultimately play an influential role in successful policy implementation and practice. Therefore, we present several policy implications regarding government to business communications and the promotion of short-term economic prosperity measures. First, policy could address the decline in capital with short-term targeted relief packages, similar to state strategy in 2008 (Schuller & Schuller-Zhou, 2009). Further improving government information accessibility by including Chinese micro-entrepreneurs in the political discourse is paramount (Wang & Yu, 2017). Posting policy information and announcements on official government social media channels, will be an effective and efficient action to further engage internet-based citizen participation as well as solicit feedback from the business community (Yan & Ting, 2018). However, this must be in conjunction with a government actor contacting entrepreneurs with information about relevant policy changes. Micro-entrepreneurs are political stakeholders and government actors should engage them in the decision-making process by asking for expectations and input. This type of engagement would improve relationships with local leaders. As Wang and Yu (2017) maintain, starting the conversation with small business will not only improve the business environment, but will allow SMEs to feel engaged.

A sustainable long-term strategy is to activate researchers, business associations and NGOs to validate the migrant micro-entrepreneur’s experience through policy awareness and educational programs. Government endorsed associations can provide training sessions to disseminate accurate information and provide council of lawyers for legal needs. Researchers can support migrant entrepreneurs by quantifying the social and financial impact of the business sector and identifying solutions which could improve their life situation. Lastly, NGOs are important agents in the current Chinese political climate with many being owned or partially operated by the government (Deng, 2015). There is a need for NGOs to aggregate insights and promote self-employed entrepreneurs to further develop the retail markets.
Migrant entrepreneurs help improve the economic and social wellbeing of urban cities, despite their concentration in wholesale and retail (Liu et al., 2018). Supporting micro-entrepreneurs with fiscal support during the COVID-19 pandemic will require proactive communication between relevant state actors and entrepreneurs and a consideration of the migrant context.

6 | CONCLUSION

Based on our ethnographic case study at two retail markets in Shanghai, COVID-19 business support policies designated for private entrepreneurs, did not benefit rural migrant micro-entrepreneurs because of an understanding that policies have historically neglected them (Yang, 2015). Getihu believe policies are legitimate but not for me because I am getihu by myself. They don’t just think it, they know it. They have a degree of certainty that their understanding is fact because it has been validated time and time again through Glaeser’s (2010) theory of validation. Each force of validation includes memories, emotions and attitudes of being a rural migrant lacking hukou (Tian, 2017). They ask fellow market getihu, landlords and managers which legitimize their understanding of policy. State agencies disagree and promote policies as empowerment for all businesses, yet this reality is irrelevant because they are not considered as significant authority within this context. Some getihu attempt to access policies but fall short of achieving benefits. This combined with apathy of using formal bank loans and the misconception about the intended beneficiary, further corroborates their belief. Remembering finally, that they are self-sufficient migrant entrepreneurs (Qian & Guo, 2019), they result to surviving with their own capabilities, thus validating their belief via resonance.

Within this paper, our objective for the ethnographic case study was three parts. First to answer the call for research exploring if the Chinese institutional landscape is effective in supporting migrant owned businesses (Liu et al., 2019). Second, to give voice and visibility to an under-represented group of rural migrants who created a thriving regional entrepreneurship ecosystem (Chen et al., 2020) in Shanghai. Third, the significant theoretical contribution of this article is to highlight the importance of the rural migrant context in policy creation and therefore, successful implementation. Public Administrators seeks to solve practical problems with policies which empower and improve citizen wellbeing. Therefore, inclusion of all citizens will lead to a stronger and more “harmonious society”, a vision consistently reiterated by Chinese officials. Understanding rural migrant entrepreneur attitudes towards business support policies in the present will allow policy makers to predict future behaviors and enable for successful crisis policy implementation and therefore a thriving economy.

In contrast to scholarship that has documented the causal impact of institutional policies on Chinese migrant entrepreneur performance (Huang et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Wang & Yu, 2017), we examine migrant entrepreneur policy understanding and knowledge formation process and how this understanding impacts policy implementation during a crisis. Thus, our study compliments studies that focus on institutional policies like hukou, which can leave a legacy of marginalization within a rural-urban migrant’s life (Tian, 2017; Wong et al., 2007) and impact attitudes towards policy (Zhang, 2014). Further, we may be the first to provide context of a regional entrepreneurial ecosystem during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, our results provide new insights to the age-old theoretical debate about the value of hukou in contemporary China. There is a growing conversation that policies must not be purely evaluated on their own merit but must consider the micro-level implementation phase to improve the policy process (Hudson et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a need for further research on the role of institutions in sustaining regional Chinese entrepreneurial ecosystems and with consideration to the rural migrant entrepreneur context. We suggest using a comparative perspective involving other emerging or advanced economies to explore the extent of policy design and
practice within the pandemic crisis setting. We argue for a comparative approach which maintains the exploratory nature of a single case study to provide rich and contextual data for an under researched population. Lastly, although qualitative longitudinal studies are best for reaching marginalized people groups, future studies could examine the generalizability of our findings through quantitative studies across tier-one Chinese cities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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**APPENDIX A**

**COVID-19 business support policies targeting micro-entrepreneurs in Shanghai**

| Policy document                                                                 | Government agency                                                                 | Document issue time | Key aspects                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Notice on Further Strengthening Financial Support to Prevent and Control the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic” No.29 | The People’s Bank of China, Ministry of Finance, China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, China Securities Regulatory Commission, State Administration of Foreign Exchange | (2020.1.31)         | Increase credit and loan support to all businesses                                                                                         |
| “Reimbursement of unemployment insurance premiums, extension of social insurance premiums... Shanghai introduces a policy to reduce corporate burdens” | Shanghai Municipal Human Resources and Security Bureau                           | (2020.2.3)         | 50% refunds on unemployment insurance premiums paid in the previous year; social insurance payment adjustments from April 1 to July 1; subsidies of 95% to business for employee online vocational trainings |
| Policy document                                                                 | Government agency                        | Document issue time | Key aspects                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Several Policies and Measures for Shanghai to Prevent and Control the Epidemic and Support the Stable and Healthy Development of Service Enterprises” | Shanghai Municipal Government            | (2020.2.9)          | 28 policies, with focus on two months free rent (required for state-owned property owners), tax deferral and tax incentives, all of which will expire three months after the epidemic is resolved |
| “About promoting consumption expansion and quality improvement implementation opinions for accelerating the formation of a strong domestic market” No.293 | National Development and Reform Commission | (2020.2.28)        | Opinion article to improve retail brand competitiveness by improving quality, marketing the Chinese culture and utilizing Internet+. Emphasizes migrant entrepreneur training programs |
| “Notice on the Implementation of Temporary Delay in Repayment of Principals and Interests for Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises” No.6 | China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission | (2020.3.1)          | Postpone principal and interest loan repayments for a period of 5 months without penalty                                                   |
| “Notice on Extending the Declaration Period of Tax Withholding and Collection and Collection Fees in 2019” No.43 | State Administration of Taxation         | (2020.3.13)         | The deadline for commissioned withholding and collection of taxes moved from March 30 to May 30                                             |
| “Li Keqiang presided over an executive meeting of the State Council to determine that a batch of local government special debt quotas will be issued in advance to drive the expansion of effective investment” | State Council Executive Meeting           | (2020.3.31)         | Premier Li Keqiang allocated 300 billion RMB in low-interest loans for household businesses                                               |
| Policy document                                                                 | Government agency                                           | Document issue time | Key aspects                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Guiding Opinions on Increasing Support for Individual Industrial and Commercial Households in Response to the Impact of the Epidemic” No.38 | Department of Circulation Industry Development, Ministry of Commerce | (2020.4.2.)         | 12 policies, with focus on lifting restrictions to resume all work and production; Postponement of social security contributions; Tax reduction and exemption from VAT policy until May 31; Landlords should reduce or remove rent for February and March; Business licenses application and process simplified; Business associations and social organizations should aid entrepreneurs with legal, education, training and public welfare activities; Reduction in online retail platform service fees |
| “Notice on Giving Full Play to the Role of “Bank and Tax Interaction” to Help Small and Micro Enterprises Resuming Work and Production” No.10 | China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission and the State Taxation Administration | (2020.4.7)          | Local banks must ensure capital flow for businesses by simplifying loan approval procedures, increase credit and prolong repayment period                                                                                                                                                                                                 |