

Buy with 1-Click: Independent Contracting and Migrant Workers in China's Last-Mile Parcel Delivery

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Abstract: *This article analyzes labor informality in the Chinese platform economy. Drawing on participant observation at a parcel delivery station in Beijing, the author discusses how individual and family lives are impacted by the hectic world of logistics work, and indeed, how companies have increased cost competitiveness through driving exploitation into forms hidden within the household. Migrant family members frequently assist each other by calling customers and wrapping parcels while their unpaid labor is subsidizing the company's business operations. Although the spheres of production and social reproduction can sometimes be integrated in cities, they confront precarious work and unequal urban citizenship.*

Keywords: *Independent Contracting; Logistics and Delivery Services; Production and Social Reproduction; Informality and Precarity; Chinese Rural Migrant Workers*

During the November 11 “Double Eleven” shopping festival, Alibaba sold 5.8 billion USD in gross merchandise in 2013, 9.3 billion USD in 2014, and over 14.3 billion USD in 2015, generating far bigger sales than the United States’ Black Friday and Cyber Monday

combined (Sun and Creech 2019: 234). Alibaba—not unlike Amazon—relies on subcontracted companies to deliver orders to consumers. Through an extensive network of logistics partners, Alibaba reduced the time to delivery of one hundred million parcels to three and a half days in 2016, as compared with nine days in 2013 (Ouyang et al. 2017: 26). With an eye on speedups of production and circulation in our digital economy, this article looks into the booming Chinese express delivery sector through the lens of the intersection of class, gender and migrant labor.

With high-speed internet connectivity and prevalence of smartphone usage, retail sales have been increasingly generated through various online platforms. Behind the hype of intelligent logistics, 3.3 million couriers deliver parcels to customers throughout rural and urban areas, and the Chinese delivery labor force has continued to grow amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Sun 2021).¹ But how do companies manage couriers through service contracting rather than employment? How do couriers, who are mostly male rural migrants, organize their work individually and collectively on a daily basis? These questions are important to shed light on the decentralized, networked nature of logistics labor behind the e-commerce boom.

Between September 2017 and August 2018, I conducted participant observation by accompanying a team of couriers on their routes during three research trips to Beijing,

the Chinese capital. In the face of the coronavirus pandemic and travel restrictions across the border between Hong Kong and the mainland, I have maintained contact with the couriers through WeChat social media since January 2020. In the intricate spheres of production and social reproduction, rural migrant workers handle parcel-delivery service on their own, without employer nor state protection. As individual contractors, couriers utilize their family and/or social networks to survive the market, and simultaneously fuel the growth of Alibaba and its logistics partners.

The next sections review global logistics studies and labor process literature to contextualize the changing work and employment relations in the sector, after which I describe access to the field site and data collection. This is followed by detailed analysis of the status of couriers (who are *not* classified as employees according to the Chinese labor law) and the challenges they face in making a viable livelihood, including geographical and temporal constraints on the movement of people and goods, provision of customer service, and tensions arising from parenting and caring for their families. The discussion section gives a wider perspective on the aspirations and frustrations of male migrants with regard to their incomes and family lives. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the consequences of labor informality in the Chinese platform economy and suggests directions for future research.

Global Logistics Chains and the Informal Workforce

In *Getting the Goods*, Edna Bonacich and Jake Wilson (2008) succinctly explain how giant retailers are driving a “logistics revolution” that encompasses transnational supply chain management from maritime and landside transportation to warehousing and local distribution. The advancement of intermodal

transportation across container ships, trains, trucks and cargo airlines has slashed operational costs and time. In recent years, new warehouses and distribution centers have been built in urban centers to shorten delivery times. With massive public and private investments, an infrastructure of telecommunications and digital mobile devices can effectively connect people in everyday life. The rise of e-commerce has generated strong demand for efficient delivery anytime, anywhere.

These global logistics and economic transformations have a significant impact on labor (Silver 2003; Nowak 2022). The use of subcontracting delivery is a core tool to reduce costs by pushing risk and insecurity onto others while avoiding costly commitments that come with direct, longer-term employment. In large distribution centers in the United States, alongside local workers, immigrants from Mexico or Central America are hired through agencies as temporary workers. The main purposes are to lower labor costs and increase flexibility to respond to spikes and troughs in business. The immigrants, with or without legal status, are mostly nonunionized and have access to only low wages and few benefits (De Lara 2018; Reese and Struna 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2021). Amazon, notably, has expanded its delivery network by “investing in contingent subcontracted last mile workers” (Alimahomed-Wilson 2020: 70). “Last mile” refers to a short travel distance of parcels shipped from city depots to designated locations requested by consumers, normally within one mile. Amazon Flex, a delivery service unit of Amazon, recruits drivers to use their own vehicles to deliver packages. Though following the directives of Amazon’s own management systems to deliver goods, they are not provided with Amazon employment contracts or any employee benefits (Altenried 2019). The requirement for quick delivery service has given rise to a fleet of contingent, on-demand labor contractors.

In Europe, there are different categories of parcel delivery workers, such as those who are employed by giant companies vis-a-vis small subcontracting firms, and their entitlements to labor rights and benefits are vastly different. But Reme-Harnay (2023) observes that the socioeconomic distinction across various groups of deliverers has become less and less clear, who are increasingly facing work precarity. Bettina Haidinger and Jörg Flecker (2015) find that many couriers are classified as “self-employed” even when they primarily rely on a regular delivery firm for everyday work. Sian Moore and Kirsty Newsome (2018) argue that the nature of parcel delivery work should be redefined as “dependent self-employment” because companies exercise direct control over the job. Employers are sometimes confronted with legal charges over labor disputes, yet they possess far greater market power over a dispersed, individualized workforce of delivery drivers. The lack of basic workers’ rights amid the fast-expanding, profitable businesses of DHL and other key players has been contentious.

Indeed, the ambiguity of workers’ employment status is not merely the product of delivery firms seeking more flexibility over the labor force. It is also the outcome of the state’s withdrawal from labor protection. Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes (1989: 30) have long pointed out that “the main cost-saving feature of informality is less the absolute level of wages than the avoidance of the ‘indirect wage’ formed by social benefits.” In China, the privilege of lifetime job security enjoyed by urban employees had been lost in successive waves of state-guided restructuring of enterprises during the 1990s and early 2000s. The state-owned postal service recruits a large proportion of couriers through agencies, which avoids full social security contributions in dubious schemes (Feng 2019). Many privately-run express delivery companies go even further by not providing “independent contractors” with any social security benefits (Zhang 2020;

Zheng et al. 2020; Shuai and Guan 2020). Under Chinese labor law, employees should have five types of insurance (including old age pensions, medical benefits, maternity benefits, work-related injury benefits and unemployment benefits) and a mandatory housing provident fund (to be used for buying an apartment). These occupation-based social security payments represent an additional benefit worth approximately one-third of an employee’s income (Chan and Selden 2019). A non-standard workforce, which is not protected by enterprises and the national state, is fast growing in Asian and Western economies.

Labor Process and Working-Class Migrant Experiences

Companies aim to maximize profits by controlling the working time and activities of workers. Amazon, FedEx, and the US Postal Service, for example, track delivery times and transportation of packages via Global Positioning System (GPS) monitoring. There is not a single stop or delivery that cannot be digitally traced (Dobson and Herbert 2021). Customers are also incorporated into corporate supervisory systems through apps, which can be easily downloaded onto smartphones. Complaints about delays or lost parcels invariably result in fines and penalties for workers. This real-time surveillance by customers and digital platforms has largely replaced direct supervision on-site (Srnicek 2017; Moore and Woodcock 2021).

Couriers are tasked to provide good service by delivering across distances as quickly as possible. David Hill (2020: 525, emphasis in original) comments that “tracking purchases through the website or app presents an abstract geography—*package has shipped; out for delivery; your item has been delivered*—that gives the illusion of smoothness behind the speed.” Supply chain “scientific management” methods and modern transportation studies

commonly ignore lived needs like workers' need for a rest break or diversification of their bodily movements to reduce repetitive motion stress (Cowen 2014). Environmental obstacles or other unexpected circumstances such as supply inconsistencies, traffic congestion, and extreme weather are not comprehensively evaluated in the work process, so the time needed for delivery is often underestimated, to the benefit of the employer. From one-click ordering to super-fast doorstep delivery, human labor is utilized in the non-frictionless logistical world.

Coercion aside, companies have introduced incentives to elicit labor compliance. Michael Burawoy (1979) illustrates how productivity-enhancing "games" motivate workers to compete with one another for tangible gains. Such granting of a certain degree of worker self-control helps secure participation in the work process. When workers' interests appear to align with corporate goals, the effect is that workers give consent to their own exploitation. In the express delivery sector, workers are often paid per successful delivery on a piecework basis; not by the hour. The piece rate system, in Karl Marx's (1990: 695) observation, makes it "in the personal interest of the worker that he should strain his labor-power as intensely as possible." Piecework fuels the sense of individual choice and the spirit of competition. Marx (1990: 697) concludes, "The wider scope that piece-wages give to individuality tends to develop both that individuality, and with it the worker's sense of liberty, independence and self-control, and also the competition of workers with each other."

Research further highlights the constitution of gendered interests in the labor process. Men, relative to women, are deemed more suitable to menial jobs requiring physical strength and stamina, such as trucking and courier services (Chinese Truck Drivers Research Group 2018a, 2018b, 2019, and 2021). But the work is intense. Male delivery workers have responded

by rescheduling less urgent deliveries with customers' prior consent. In this way, they are not completely subordinated to corporate control or customer demand (Zhuang 2019; Shuai 2021). Relatively successful workers, who mobilize their personalities and interpersonal skills to perform interactive service work, also enjoy a modest level of economic security, thereby enhancing the men's self-worth as microentrepreneurs and breadwinners.

With higher mobility or increased rural-to-urban migration, nearly 300 million internal migrants are working and living outside their registered hometowns in contemporary China. Chinese rural migrant workers and their children, whose official household registrations remain in rural areas and who hence have no equal access to government welfare support like their urban counterparts, are confronting numerous challenges in cities. This semi-urbanization process, complicated by the state's weak governance over labor subcontracting, has shaped the working and living conditions of rural migrants in the digital economy (Chen 2020; Lin and Pun 2021; Zhou 2022). As will be discussed, capitalist utilization of reserved labor power of couriers' family members in logistics chains intensifies production, and drives exploitation deep into the household.

Fieldwork in Beijing

Beijing is a megacity with some 22 million people, including almost nine million rural migrants from all over the country. Low-skilled workers are looking for new opportunities in the parcel-delivery service sector. In September 2017, with the team leader's permission, I took up an unpaid traineeship at a delivery station located in a bustling commercial and residential area at the city center. In April and August 2018, I conducted two rounds of follow-up interviews with the

couriers and their families. The 20 couriers I interviewed, ranging from 20 to 46 years of age, were all rural migrants (coming from other parts of Hebei Province, and other provinces including Jilin, Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi and Guangxi). They had completed primary or secondary education before migrating to Beijing in search of jobs. Previously, they had worked on construction sites, in mines, in factories, or at sales and service jobs, which lasted for a few weeks to several years. Six interviewees were married with at least one child. Only two of these interviewees, including the team leader, had brought their children with them to the city.

During fieldwork, I paired up with multiple couriers, separately, to deliver goods on an electric tricycle until I became familiar with the job routines and the geography of the delivery areas. The Beijing no. 1 Delivery Station², not unlike many other delivery stations in the neighborhood, does not provide couriers with employment contracts. As an owner-operator, the courier is responsible for daily operating costs. He has to pay up front for an electric tricycle, two packs of rechargeable batteries for the tricycle, a scale (to measure the weight of collected products), a trolley (to move large bags and heavy boxes), a voice-enabled handheld printing device (to print address labels), a large quantity of delivery forms and invoices (to collect packages from customers) and packaging materials, along with repairs and maintenance expenses (such as tires and smartphone service fees). The initial investment in the “independent business” amounts to some 4,000 CNY (600 USD), roughly a month’s wages for a low-income worker in Beijing.

From morning until evening, Monday through Sunday, I shadowed the team throughout Beijing’s second ring road region in the heart of the city. I often held four or five lightweight packages on my lap, sat next to the courier, got on and off to deliver them, picked up outbound

goods from customers, filled out the delivery forms or invoices, and then packed the parcels for same-day delivery. We squatted on the floor to do the packing because there were no chairs. A workday of 12 to 14 hours, seven days a week, was considered normal. Our daily schedules did not permit a regular lunch or dinner hour, particularly when we rushed to meet deadlines. Frequently, our meals were interrupted by customers’ calls to inquire about exact delivery times or the whereabouts of their packages. We sometimes grabbed a banana or two to fill our stomachs on the moving tricycle to save time. We also ate dust on the road, as most low-cost tricycles were equipped with neither a windshield nor overhead cover. We sweated under the burning sun and got wet from head to toe in heavy rains. Hot or cold, we beat the time to complete our work.

Male workers continue to dominate parcel delivery while a female workforce has been slowly on the rise (often in association with their husband or another coworker) (CBNData and Suning.com 2018). As a trainee I was not seen as a qualified courier, but was referred to as a wife or sister, depending on my workmate. Indeed, I recalled astonishment on customers’ face when delivering and collecting parcels on my own. The couriers whom I observed provided direct testimony to the financial burdens, stressful supervision, long hours and difficult work environment of their jobs. How they understood my involvement in their work also shed light on the gendered presumptions of the job. But these conditions were not limited to the delivery station where I gained access to the field. During the long workday, I had opportunities to talk to the couriers of other companies who were picking up or delivering packages in the same areas.³ These encounters provided me with a better sense of the broad similarities of delivery work across companies in a highly competitive market, and it is to these common themes that I now turn.



Figure 1: A team of couriers unloads a full truck of parcels in an early morning at the delivery station. The author, pictured in blue shirt, is a trainee while conducting participant observation in Beijing. Photo provided by the author.

Managing Express Delivery

Supervisor Han, a 31-year-old migrant married with two small children, had been managing the Beijing no. 1 Delivery Station for a year and a half. His team processed approximately 2,500 packages a day. Following spending sprees, the number of deliveries would shoot up to over 5,000 pieces a day. Pressure for quick delivery is high and requires efficiency at both the individual and team levels. “We are constantly rushing” is a shared experience of delivery workers. The job takes a lot of running when there are more than 150 packages—to be delivered at different addresses—in a workday. While the total number of deliveries fluctuates on any day, a worker is expected to handle between 100 and 180 packages daily.

From Monday to Friday, the delivery team starts work at 6:30am. On the weekend, as

government departments, banks and some other types of offices are closed, the team begins an hour later, at 7:30am. Except for the Chinese New Year Festival, when couriers, truck drivers and customer service representatives take a weeklong unpaid holiday, the delivery station operates throughout the year. In the intensely competitive work environment, other bigger companies continue to offer timely delivery service during the festival, operating up to 365 days a year.

In the early morning, couriers unload the container truck to sort the goods. The first step is to distribute them to individual couriers in accordance with the designated delivery working areas (which cover a number of streets, shops, and buildings). The second step is to double-check the address labels and scan the barcodes or QR (Quick Response) codes into the electronic system through a smartphone app. The third and final step is to load up the delivery tricycles to get ready for dispatch. These three steps are standardized work procedures at the delivery station.



Figure 2: Working in the parcel delivery service in China. Photo provided by the author.

Between 8am and 9am, customer calls start to come in, along with online text messages. They receive alerts that their packages have been scanned and queued for delivery. Shop owners chase their boxes of fresh fruit, secretaries their files and documents, and residents their home appliances, to name only a few examples. In urgent cases, Supervisor Han delivered packages on his motorbike. Otherwise, he stayed to help carry heavy goods and load them onto couriers' tricycles.



Figure 3: Couriers upload parcels to an electric tricycle for delivery. Photo provided by the author.

Zhang is a 45-year-old experienced courier who had worked in the express delivery industry

since 2013, while his wife looks after their teenage daughter and other family members at rural Jiangxi. He knows the tricks of the trade and shared useful tips:

Everything has to be put in order. I place the small packages in a large bag to carry them easily. The address labels of the letters face up. I put the letters and packages one layer on top of another. The bottom layer means the first floor, while the topmost layer the nineteenth floor of the building. There, I will take the lift all the way up to the 19th floor and then run downstairs to save time and energy. If you start to deliver from the ground floor, you've got to climb stairs, pulling the heavy bag. At peak morning hours, there's no time for you to wait for the lift to go up on each and every floor. The lifts are full. I can't afford the wait.

We are not permitted to use the passenger lifts, but have to use the cargo lifts by the side or at the back in office buildings, luxury hotels, theaters and high-end dining places. As couriers from other firms are similarly flooding in and racing against time to complete their delivery tasks, the wait time is getting longer. When the lift doors open, Zhang goes straight to the first delivery place.

At a company's reception counter, Zhang tears off the delivery sticker for his record. "A missing delivery or parcel loss," Zhang explains, "will be penalized." However, if time is extremely tight, Zhang will simply leave it and later check the "successful delivery" tab in the smartphone app. On the next floor and the one after that, he dispatches the parcels quickly.

Deliveries can be more time consuming, however. There are private places where

visitors must wait downstairs. Zhang calls his customers to come down to get their orders. He waits, sometimes anxiously, and calls yet again. “Come on, ten minutes now. I’ll make a follow-up call.” Zhang redials the phone number, and it is still unanswered. On Monday, some office documents and other packages have piled up during the weekend, and they must be cleared as soon as possible in the morning.

Time is of the essence. The company’s policies require that by 2pm at least 70 per cent of the packages must be delivered. Couriers who fail in that objective risk being fired after three warnings. This is why Zhang only has a few minutes left to grab something to eat on his route near 2pm.

Couriers are exposed to multiple workspace constraints beyond their control. In a 330,000-square-meter (3,552,090-square-foot) complex with newly opened offices, shops and restaurants, Liang, a 25-year-old factory worker turned courier, finds it “like a maze”. He has been on the delivery team for six months. “But I can’t figure out the opening hours of the bars and clubs and coworking spaces. Except for the 7-Eleven convenience store, it seems that they have flexible hours. I have to call and arrange redelivery if they’re out.” Liang explains that the four connected plazas are a difficult place to navigate: “Let me give you an example. It’s Monday late morning, but the art studio is closed. I call and no one answers. In the afternoon, the customer returns my call and urges me to deliver the item. I’ve got to come back again to accommodate his needs. He’s a gold-collar professional. He knows customers’ rights, and he could complain of a late delivery.” Liang has no choice but to reroute to drop off the package before taking care of the remaining packages elsewhere. Learning the lesson, he tries to proactively reach out to office managers, shop owners and security officers in the mall, so that they can help passing on packages when recipients are not immediately available.

A bit farther away from Galaxy SOHO, the mega plaza, people live in old residential apartments. Little Cao, 20 years old, is the youngest brother of Brother Cao, who has just joined the team for two weeks through his brother’s introduction. Little Cao describes the following problem of delivery work:

I’m responsible for sending packages to residents in three adjacent hutongs [alleys], namely, Zhugan Hutong at the center, Bei Zhugan Hutong in the north, and Nan Zhugan Hutong in the south. I bet even the old Beijing locals would find these hutongs confusing! It’s Zhugan Hutong, Block 3. But there’s absolutely no Room 1301! No thirteenth floor. I dialed the phone number and got connected. Yet the reception was so poor that I couldn’t hear him at all. I texted him. Oh, it turned out to be Room B01! Bad handwriting indeed.

Little Cao carries the package down to the basement. He adds, “I’m not always so lucky. When people are at home, they will open the door and fetch packages quickly. If they’re not at home, I’ve got to see what to do. It happens that the recipient has already moved out or the telephone number is wrong.” Whatever the cause, the cost of nondelivery is solely borne by couriers.

From 2017 to 2018, the speedup of work clearly reflected consumers’ demand for quicker delivery, as well as the company’s drive for shorter turnaround times. Under a new company policy, couriers were required to handle three batches of goods a day as they arrived at the delivery station. That is, they repeated the basic work steps of sorting, scanning and loading in the early morning, at 2:00pm and then at 5:00pm. In the past, couriers could finish earlier without taking care

of the late afternoon round of delivery. Couriers' family time and leisure hours are being squeezed.

Serving Customers with Good Service

The company motto is "Delivering trust and sharing love". Supervisor Han suggests couriers wear company uniforms to present a professional image, even though none of the couriers are formal employees. He also highlights the importance of careful route planning, reliability, and good communication, especially when customers require delivery within a specified and narrow time window. "Good customer service can dramatically increase your revenue," Supervisor Han emphasizes.

Some couriers positively identify personal care and social reciprocity in customer interactions. Once, Little Cao, the youngest courier of the team, lifted a big box for home delivery. As the package was worn out, he suggested opening it to check its contents, instead of leaving it unattended. "Three five-kilogram bags of rice, one one-liter jar of cooking oil and one five-hundred-gram bottle of soy source," Little Cao said, doing stocktaking. The old woman thanked him for his attention to detail. "She gave me a bottle of water when seeing me soaked in sweat the other day," Little Cao said, recalling the moment with a smile.

Day in and day out, couriers have turned their assigned delivery zone into a social community. Cousin Cao, a native of Shanxi and a close relative of the Cao brothers, shares some pleasant experiences even when the work is "tiring and stressful". He is 28 years old and has an outgoing personality. "I enjoy meeting with many different people. Some are frequent online shoppers, while others are running online stores to sell things. When there's time, we chat, and I get to know them more. They're friendly." Interpersonal communications in

interactive service work, although limited by the steep delivery targets, have made working lives less monotonous.

Cousin Cao contrasts work on the delivery team to his previous manufacturing job: "I had worked in a factory where I was not allowed to talk during the entire work shift. I was bored to death. When I had to go to the toilet, I needed to get someone's permission. In contrast, I can now drive on Chang'an Avenue, feel the breeze and see the sun." As Cousin Cao was driving along the sidewalk in the morning, shop owners greeted him by calling and waving. He elaborated: "They're nice people. Life is half bitter—they've witnessed wars and the turbulent transformation of society—and now are retiring for good. I love listening to their stories." Shops occasionally gave him free drinks and cigarettes. In reciprocity, he offered them a discount for pickups in large quantities.

Generally speaking, couriers are interested in quick deliveries in order to free themselves to collect goods. It is worth noting that there are two components of couriers' earnings: deliveries and collections. From within Beijing, the pickup fare was 8 CNY (1.20 USD) for packages weighing under one kilogram (2.2 pounds) in 2017 and 2018. Following company rules, 50 per cent of the collection fee is earned by the courier and 30 per cent by the company. The remaining 20 per cent covers the costs of packaging material.

One day, Cousin Cao skipped lunch after receiving a call: "I immediately arrive at the hotel after hanging up. I charge a total of 240 CNY for picking up three pieces of large luggage, based on the size and weight as well as the distance. I earn as much as two-thirds from it, or approximately 160 CNY, because I don't need to pack them. I only have to pay for three delivery forms and three plastic bags for waterproofing, that's all. With this big order, I make more than a day's door-to-door delivery work!" In that exceptionally good month,

Cousin Cao earned 8,000 CNY (1,212 USD), with more than half of his earnings coming from collecting consumer goods for delivery.

Networking is important in personal business expansion. Cheng, a 25-year-old high school graduate, possesses the highest education level among his fellow couriers. He went so far as to offer free delivery of two boxes of mooncakes during the Mid-Autumn Festival to befriend a hotel manager. “Manager Ma, let me assure you that I’m able to serve as a trustworthy delivery agent, giving you the best service at the best price,” Cheng spoke confidently. “Our company has a nationwide, cross-border and overseas logistics network around the world. Our speed, quality, and customer services are world renowned.” He saw that the five-star hotel “represents a lucrative long-term business opportunity” as the number of packages collected from Manager Ma and the hotel could be many.

“When I get many orders, I can save money to get married in my hometown in Jiangxi.” In doing so, couriers like Cheng are driven to compete with one another to cut prices to the bone to win (potential) business. Earnings are unpredictable. Couriers who fail to win the hearts of customers are destined to fail.

Wei, a 29-year-old father with two children and his wife left behind in his home village in Handan City of Hebei Province, is unable to make his way. “In one bad month, I earned only 2,800 CNY. My smartphone was broken, and I need to buy a new one.” His efforts to attract customers, such as posting a WeChat social media contact on his tricycle, did not seem to work. “Even during the good times, based on deliveries, I had only 4,500 CNY a month in my territory.” Wei finally quit after working for ten months because “there’s really no way to make money.” He was unable to make pickup services by building a network of customers. In contrast to his previous work in construction, such as laying bricks, express delivery seemed

to him “less strenuous.” But he added hastily, “All I need is to earn money. I’ve heard that delivering food for Meituan can make a lot more than delivering parcels. Isn’t that the case?” Migrant couriers like Wei, who only finished primary school, are desperate to survive in the new service economy.

Customer dissatisfaction about service quality poses yet other challenges. Transportation workers move goods during many parts of their journey, creating friction that could damage the packages or their contents. The following is a typical example:

CUSTOMER: How come the tin of tea leaves is crushed like this? What’s wrong with you?

COURIER ZHAO: No, it’s not my fault. Should you have any concerns, please feel free to contact our customer service representative. She will explain to you the policy of hassle-free returns.

CUSTOMER: Oh no! How about the other three boxes? There should be totally four packages. We bought them all at one time. Are the three left behind in Kunming?

COURIER ZHAO: Alright, let me help you. This is our company online tracking app. Give me the reference numbers. Here it shows that at half past six on 17 September, the goods were scanned at the Kunming Distribution Center in Yunnan Province. At nine o’clock on 18 September, the goods were uploaded to the truck, heading to the Beijing Distribution Center. This afternoon I’ll get them and bring them to you.

Zhao, a 38-year-old demobilized soldier and former rail repair worker, stayed calm to

delineate his role and responsibility in last-mile delivery. He was assertive rather than subservient. To ease the awkward situation, he updated the expected delivery time and offered an option of returns and refunds. Luckily, his customers did not make any complaints; otherwise, he could be fined.

Juggling Work with Parenting and Caring for Families

During delivery spikes for sales promotions, daily working hours for parcel delivery extend to fifteen hours or longer. The handling of high-volume, time-bound deliveries is further complicated by the special demands of “difficult customers”. Family life is destabilized and encroached on by the hectic world of work.

One night, Hu, a 46-year-old courier quickly packed the packages with dexterous hands. On a rotating basis, he also assembled all the packages from his teammates at the delivery station and then took them to the warehouse for same-night dispatch. The company’s delivery cutoff time was 8:30pm sharp. The warehousing workers relayed by placing the collected packages on conveyor belts. A fleet of trucks would immediately move the goods to the Beijing Distribution Center overnight for next-day delivery.

After, it was nearly 9:00pm when Hu drove the empty tricycle home. He had very little time to talk to his wife and 15-year-old son while having a late dinner himself. By 10:00pm, he was exhausted and went to sleep so that he could wake up early for work in the morning. In his words, “I hope my son will focus on his studies. Not like me, I have no culture, no knowledge. I come from a village in poverty-stricken Anhui. Our small plot of land at home has long been left fallow. Here, Beijing is our only hope. Delivering is physically hard work. My back aches, legs are sore and stomach hurts. But I hope to support my only child to

make a better future.”

Hu’s wife is a part-time domestic worker. She also does all the household chores at home. If there are not many deliveries and pickups after the third and final batch, Hu can go home for a family dinner at around 7:30pm. In comparison, most of Hu’s coworkers have no choice but to leave behind their own wife and children in rural hometowns, so Hu’s position is somewhat enviable, despite the fact that he is unable to bring his parents and parents-in-law under the same roof in Beijing. After all, the living place for Hu’s three-person family is a small rental room with no window, kitchen, or toilet. Still the rent costs 1,500 CNY a month, excluding water and electricity bills.

Liao, 40 years old, like Hu is a migrant from rural Anhui. During a rest break from work, he shared about his family. “My son, who’s now twelve years old, is looked after by my parents. Here, there is only my wife and myself, a temporary arrangement,” Liao explained. His wife assisted him in packing and buying packing materials. When there was still time, she did part-time jobs. The so-called temporary working and living arrangement, as I found out later, had actually lasted for a decade. Liao expressed his wish: “One day we’ll go back home for a happy reunion.” The Liao couple had remitted hard-earned money to build “a nice house” in their hometown for long-term resettlement. At present, the forced separation of families—the divided household arrangement between city and countryside—is presumably a requirement for many workers’ compliance with excessively long hours that diminish family life.

Self-employed laborers do not enroll in the urban social insurance scheme administered by the Beijing municipal government. This means that the Liao couple are not eligible for a local pension, health care, or other social security benefits, rendering life in the city very difficult for them in the long term. Most importantly,

not unlike other rural migrant parents, they are not provided with affordable public education for their child in Beijing, despite ongoing educational reforms and expansion.

In everyday life, Supervisor Han relies on his parents-in-law to look after his son and daughter, while his wife helps at the delivery station attending to walk-in customers. “Life is so busy. My wife and I work from early morning to late night, all day every day. Sometimes we’ve only a few hours of sleep,” he said, sighing.

In late November 2017, the number of deliveries drastically dropped when local officials suspended the operations of distribution centers for weeks for safety drills after a tragic fire in the Daxing District, on the southern outskirts of Beijing. The fire broke out at a residential building whose three floors (two stories and a basement) were divided into tiny rooms cramped with tenants for cheap rent. It took 19 lives, eight of them children. Instead of providing emergency aid to the victims and survivors, the government drove away tens of thousands of “low-end” (低端) people—as described in the derogatory official terminology—from China’s capital. The fire sparked waves of demolitions of “illegal structures,” including rented apartments, factories, warehouses, wholesale markets, schools, restaurants, and shops, uprooting the lives of marginalized individuals and families. It became a citywide “cleanup” campaign to evict migrant workers and other low-income groups. With the mass clearing of the undesirable population across districts from within Beijing, letters and packages were at times undelivered, causing disruptions to logistics supply chains and exposing delivery workers’ vulnerabilities.

By the Chinese New Year Festival of mid-February 2018, Supervisor Han had resigned and taken his wife, five-year-old son, and 18-month-old daughter back to their home

province of Jiangxi. He explained: “Our core concern is our children. We’re not classified as Beijing city people. We don’t have urban household registrations and can’t find a public primary school right here for our son, who’s going to start primary this fall. We’ve been trying very hard for the whole last year to find him a place but to no avail. As supervisor I receive 5,000 CNY a month, plus an end-of-year bonus, which is not bad. Still, we’re not eligible for basic social services such as children’s access to education.” Segregation by education, besides housing, is clearly a marker of the low-class status of unskilled migrant workers.

Discussion

In a rapidly urbanizing China, hundreds of millions of rural migrants are dominant not only in manufacturing and construction, but also in sales and customer service. The government and companies alike hailed couriers as “heroes” (英雄), “hardworking bees” (勤劳的小蜜蜂) and “safe-guarders of a good life” (美好生活的守护者) who tirelessly deliver food, medicine and other vital supplies to homes, hospitals and workplaces all year round. Moral and symbolic recognition aside, rural migrant deliverymen and their families lack fundamental labor protections and urban citizenship rights in major cities like Beijing.

Outside the parameters of China’s labor law system, independent contractors are not entitled to statutory minimum wages at the local level. In 2019, a survey (State Post Bureau 2020) of 65,514 delivery workers found that more than 75 per cent of the respondents earned less than 5,000 CNY (758 USD) a month on average in the country. More than half of the respondents put in at least ten hours a day, six or seven days a week. To put these figures into perspective: Beijing’s legal minimum wage at the time was 2,200 CNY (333 USD) a month, which was calculated with reference to a five-

day workweek of 40 hours. Compared to migrant workers in other low-skilled industries, couriers tend to earn higher wages, but they have to work very long hours without overtime premiums. Moreover, informal workers are unable to access the social and welfare benefits available to formal employees. As Mary Gallagher (2020: 197) argues, “the labor law system and the system of social insurance must change if workers in this new economy are to be included in China’s developing welfare state.”

Couriers also have to pay for their food and lodging, with rent being the biggest expense. In terms of delivery pay rates, this study found that it took five years, from 2017 to 2022, for the Beijing no. 1 Delivery Station to raise the piece rate from 1 CNY (0.15 USD) to 1.2 CNY (0.18 USD) per package, with the increase reflecting the company’s effort to retain experienced couriers to cope with the expected exponential demand. At the same time, the costs of packaging materials (such as cardboard, envelopes, plastic bags, sealing tape and packaging filler material), solely borne by the courier, have gone up, in part due to the supply shortage amid COVID-19 lockdowns.

In managing parcel delivery work, the masculine ethos is discipline and determination, as encapsulated in the slogan “No pain, no gain” (没有付出就没有收获). Couriers are told that if they fail, they have no one to blame but themselves. In reaching out to big clients, they pay on their own account to make name cards bearing the title of “business manager” (业务经理). This presentation of self suggests a white-collar rather than blue-collar job. Couriers are either called by their names or referred to as “delivery brothers” (快递小哥), reflective of someone whose occupational status is not high. They wear jeans or sports trousers with sneakers, not a suit with a tie and leather shoes; otherwise, they cannot run fast enough to meet the delivery deadlines. After a day’s work, their fingers are lined with dirt.

Indeed, they are despised by some customers for their “sweating and smelly bodies.” Their working-class position has not been elevated, even when some succeed in earning more than in previous work.

Couriers frequently draw on familial and social resources to complete work tasks; thus, a less visible form of homework emerges in the downstream logistics chain. Parents and parents-in-law, brothers and sisters, as well as husbands and wives, are mobilized to help one another (while school-aged children are protected from work so that they may concentrate on their studies). When a courier is sick or injured, corporate elicitation of affect and social relations will also set in motion. A delivery station, which resembles a small factory, has its “head of the big working family”, who encourages mutual assistance between couriers in the team. The unpaid labor involved in calling customers or wrapping parcels, for example, greatly subsidizes the delivery station in its daily operation. In this way, exploitation is more hidden but intensified on the front line.

Conclusion

“Buy now with one click” has simplified the different stages of online shopping. E-commerce behemoths like Amazon and Alibaba, together with their domestic and overseas networks of contracted delivery firms, have created a high-speed, digital ecosystem through outsourcing of labor (Wu and Gereffi 2019). Through reclassification of employment as independent contracting, male couriers are compelled to work hard to provide their own families with the main source of income. This family arrangement is characterized by minimal fathering. Societal support to migrant households is scant, with the weakest ones leaving in defeat.

Individual contractors—who have to provide

their own means of production at work—are exposed to the uncertainties imposed by the market. Cutthroat price wars have driven a sense of competition, if not hostility, among workers. Couriers are pitted against one another to compete in customer service through their speed, cost, and quality. In the labor process, work performance is monitored through real-time locational tracking technologies and constant feedback of customers. Deliverymen’s bodies wear out fast, and they are easily disposable. Labor turnover is high, weakening the possibilities of nurturing stable social relations and uniting to press for better conditions even when localized, short-lived protests are frequent. It was not until July 2021 that the central government initiated a coordinated plan involving eight ministries (including the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the only trade union officially allowed to exist in China) to protect couriers’ rights and interests, including occupational health and safety under the COVID-19 pandemic (Lin 2022; Xie 2022).⁴

Chinese migrant informal workers are doubly trapped in non-standard employment relations as unwaged subcontracting workers, and in an unequal citizenship regime segmented by rural/urban household registration status (Lee 2019). Future investigations of the themes emerging from this research would be worthwhile in understanding the dynamics of the contingent labor market. How does unpaid homeworking contribute to the expansion of the logistics sector while saving the organizational costs of the company? What does urban development mean to long-term migrants who cannot live with their children and enjoy no right to pensions but are frequently evicted by the local government? How can we assess the effects of family separation on migrant workers’ choices on or off the job? These questions will inspire us to think deeper on labor informality and precarity, gender and family, as well as rural-urban migration in fast-changing China and other

societies.

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Notes

¹ As of 2021, the *CPPCC Daily*, the news agency of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), reported that there were an estimated 3.3 million parcel delivery couriers, plus 8 million food delivery riders, and the number has been growing (Sun 2021).

² This type of subcontracting business entity—not a subsidiary—has to take care of its profit and loss. The boss, supervisors and couriers of the Beijing no. 1 Delivery Station (a pseudonym) are all classified as self-employed, not employees.

³ In Beijing and many other cities, large companies such as EMS, Cainiao (owned by Alibaba), SF Express, Yunda Express, ZTO Express, YTO Express, STO Express, Best Express, TTK Express, ZJS Express, J&T Express, Deppon Logistics and JD Logistics are providing door-to-door courier services.

⁴ The Chinese Government across different levels has emphasized protection of platform-based laborers, or gig workers, through unionization at the workplace and community levels, but the outcomes or impacts of this renewed attention are to be carefully assessed.