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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.[1] 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 half days in 2016, as compared with nine days in 2013.[2] With an eye on speedups of production and circulation in our digital economy, this chapter looks into the booming Chinese express delivery sector through the lens of the intersection of class, gender, and migrant labor.

As of 2018, China had more than three million couriers, and the labor force has continued to grow.[3] SF Express, for example, a leading integrated logistics solutions provider, had 291,400 couriers, of whom 246,200 (84.5 percent) were outsourced staff.[4] How do express delivery firms manage couriers through service contracting rather than employment? How do couriers, who are mostly male rural migrants, organize their work individually and collectively to advance their self-interest? 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, the author conducted participant observation by accompanying a team of couriers on their routes during three research trips to Beijing, the capital of China. In the face of COVID-19 and travel restrictions across the border between Hong Kong and the mainland, she has maintained contact with the couriers through WeChat social media. This ethnographic study illuminates the social organization of low-paid delivery work by focusing on labor subcontracting and its utilization of couriers' family and social networks to generate profits for the company. Through firsthand interviews, the aspirations and frustrations of male migrants with regard to their work and family lives are expressed.

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) and the challenges they face in making a viable livelihood, including spatial and temporal restraints, provision of good customer service, and tensions arising from parenting and caring for their families. The discussion section gives a wider perspective on Chinese internal migrants engaged in the informal service sector. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the consequences of labor informality and suggests directions for future research.

Global Logistics Chains and the Informal Workforce

In Getting the Goods, Edna Bonacich and Jake B. Wilson succinctly explain how giant retailers such as Walmart 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.[5] In recent years, new warehouses and distribution centers have been built in urban centers to shorten delivery times. Moreover, a massive infrastructure of telecommunications and digital mobile devices has connected consumers via online platforms. The rise of e-commerce and online shopping has generated strong demand for efficient delivery.

These global logistic and economic transformations have a significant impact on labor. 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.[6] 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. Amazon, notably, has expanded its delivery network by “investing in contingent subcontracted last mile workers.”[7] “Last mile” refers to a short travel distance of parcels shipped from city depots to designated locations requested by consumers, normally within a mile. Amazon Flex, a delivery service unit of Amazon, recruits drivers to use their own vehicles to deliver packages. Though they follow the directives of Amazon’s own digital systems to deliver goods, on-demand drivers are not provided with Amazon employment contracts or any employee benefits.[8]

In Europe, Bettina Haidinger and Jörg Flecker likewise find that couriers are classified as “independent contractors” even when they primarily rely on a regular delivery firm for everyday work.[9] Sian Moore and Kirsty Newsome argue that the nature of parcel delivery work should be redefined as “dependent self-employment” because companies exercise direct control over the job, even when the workers are not employees.[10] 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 parcel delivery 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 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.”[11] In China, the state-owned postal service unit recruits a large proportion of couriers through agencies, which avoid full social security contributions in dubious schemes.[12] Many privately run express delivery companies go even further by not providing “self-employed” workers with any social security benefits. 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. The Chinese state has yet to regulate the nonstandard workforce at the bottom of the logistics chains.

Labor Process, Gender, and Working-Class Migrant Experiences

In the production process, companies aim to maximize profits by controlling the working time and activities of workers.[13] 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.[14] Customers are also incorporated into corporate supervisory systems through apps, which can be easily downloaded onto smartphones. This real-time surveillance by customers and digital platforms has greatly replaced direct supervision on-site.[15] Customers' complaints about delays or lost parcels invariably result in fines and penalties for workers.

Couriers are compelled to provide good service by delivering across distances as quickly as possible. David W. Hill 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."[16] "Scientific" supply chain 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.[17] Environmental obstacles or other unexpected circumstances such as supply inconsistencies, traffic congestion, and extreme weather are not comprehensively evaluated in the work process, and so the time needed for delivery is underestimated, to the benefit of the employer. From one-click ordering to super-fast doorstep delivery, human labor is utilized in the nonfrictionless logistical world.

Coercion aside, companies have introduced incentives to elicit labor compliance. Michael Burawoy illustrates how productivity-enhancing "games" motivate workers to compete with one another for tangible gains.[18] 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 paid per successful delivery on a piecework basis (not by the hour). The piece rate system, in Karl Marx's observation, makes it "in the personal interest of the worker that he should strain his labor-power as intensely as possible."[19] Piecework fuels the sense of individual choice and the spirit of competition. Marx 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."[20]

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. 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.[21] 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.[22] What remains understudied is the relationship between work and family responsibilities facing migrant parents. Chinese rural migrant workers and their children, whose household registrations remain in rural areas and who hence have no access to government welfare support like their urban counterparts, are compelled to do informal work and live precariously.

Fieldwork in Beijing

Beijing has nearly twenty-two million people, including almost nine million rural migrants from all over the country. 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 twenty couriers I interviewed, ranging from twenty to forty-six years of age, were all rural migrants. They had completed primary or secondary education before migrating to the city 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 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 Station (a pseudonym), 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 packing because there were no chairs. A workday of twelve to fourteen 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. As a female trainee I was not seen as a qualified courier but was referred to as a wife or sister, depending on my workmate.

> 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. These encounters provided me with
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> 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.

Managing Express Delivery

Supervisor Han, a thirty-one-year-old Jiangxi rural 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 twenty-five hundred packages a day. Following spending sprees, the number of deliveries would shoot up to over five thousand 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 6:30 a.m. On the weekend, as government departments, banks, and some other types of offices are closed, the team begins an hour later, at 7:30 a.m. Except for the Chinese New Year Festival, when couriers, truck drivers, and customer service representatives take a weeklong but 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 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.

Between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m., customers' 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 fruits, 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.

Zhang is a forty-five-year-old experienced courier who had worked in the express delivery industry since 2013. 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 the other. 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 nineteenth 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 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.

The company's policies require that by 2 p.m. at least 70 percent of the packages must be delivered. Time is of the essence. 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 2 p.m.

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 twenty-five-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, twenty 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 2:00 p.m., and then at 5:00 p.m. 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 relative of the Cao brothers, shares some pleasant experiences even when the work is “tiring and stressful.” He is twenty-eight years old and has an outgoing personality. “I enjoy meeting with many different people. Some are frequent online shoppers, while the 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. Cousin Cao 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 out free drinks and cigarettes to him. 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 for collecting 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 percent of the collection fee is earned by the courier and 30 percent by the company. The remaining 20 percent 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 the call. I charge totally 240 yuan 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 yuan, 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 twenty-five-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 doing so, couriers like Cheng are nevertheless 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 twenty-nine-year-old father with two children left behind in his home village, is unable to make his way. "In one bad month, I earned only 2,800 yuan. 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 yuan 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 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 September 17, the goods were scanned at the Kunming Distribution Center in Yunnan province. At nine o'clock on September 18, 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 thirty-eight-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 would 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, timebound 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 forty-six-year-old courier quickly packed the packages with his dexterous hands. On a rotation 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 8:30 p.m. 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 9:00 p.m. when Hu drove the empty tricycle home. He had very little time to talk to his wife and fifteen-year-old son while having a late dinner himself. By 10:00 p.m., he was exhausted and went to sleep so that he would 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 all our 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 does all the household chores. If there are not many deliveries and pickups after the third and final batch, Hu can go home for a family dinner at around 7:30 p.m. 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.

Liao, forty years old, is a migrant from rural Anhui, the same birthplace as Hu. 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 package 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 house in their hometown for long-term resettlement.[23] At present, the forced separation of families—the divided household arrangement between city and countryside—is absolutely a requirement for workers’ compliance with excessively long hours that diminish family life.

For the Liao couple, as self-employed migrants, they are not enrolled in the social insurance scheme administered by the Beijing municipal government. This means that they 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, they are not provided with affordable public education for their child.

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 (to attend to walk-in customers). “Life is so busy. My wife and I are working from early morning to late night, all day every day. Sometimes we’ve only a few hours of sleep,” he says, sighing.

In late November 2017, the number of deliveries drastically dropped when the Beijing municipal government suspended the operations of distribution centers for weeks in undertaking safety drills following a tragic fire in the Daxing district, on the southern outskirts of Beijing. The deadly fire broke out at a residential building whose three floors (two stories and a basement) were divided into tiny rooms and cramped with tenants for cheap rent. It took nineteen lives, eight of them children. Instead of providing emergency aid to the victims and survivors, the government began to chase away tens of thousands of “low-end” people—as described in the derogatory official terminology—from China’s capital. The fire sparked waves of official 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, letters and packages were undelivered, causing disruptions to logistics supply chains and exposing delivery workers’ vulnerabilities on the margins of the city.

By the Chinese New Year Festival of mid-February 2018, Supervisor Han had resigned and taken his wife, five-year-old son, and eighteen-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 yuan a month, plus an end-of-year bonus, which is not bad. Still, we’re not eligible for basic social benefits such as children’s access to education.”

Discussion

Chinese rural migrants are dominant not only in manufacturing and construction industries, but also in sales and customer service.[24] The government and companies alike hailed couriers as “heroes,” “hardworking bees,” and “safe-guarders of a good life,” who tirelessly deliver food, medicine, and other vital supplies to homes, hospitals, and workplaces all the 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 wage at the local level.

In 2019, an official survey of delivery workers in China found that more than 75 percent of the 65,514 respondents earned less than 5,000 CNY (758 USD) a month. More than half of the respondents put in “at least ten hours” a day.[25] To put these figures into perspective: Beijing’s minimum wage at the time was 2,200 CNY (333 USD)

a month, which was calculated with reference to a five-day workweek of forty 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 E. Gallagher 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.”[26]

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 or wooden boxes, envelopes, plastic bags, sealing tape, and pack-aging filler material), solely borne by the courier, have gone up. Couriers also have to pay for their food and lodging, with rent the biggest expense.

The masculine ethos is discipline and determination, as encapsulated in the slogan of “No pain, no gain.” 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.” 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 boys” or “delivery brothers,” 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 as “sweating and smelly bodies.” Their working-class position has not been elevated, even when some succeed to earn more than in previous work.

When demand for delivery services is strong, there are no fixed or regular working hours. In daily life, married couriers rely heavily on their wives and/or parents for childcare and other housework while working hard to provide their families with the main source of income. This migrant family arrangement is characterized by minimal fathering. The working and living conditions can be harsh, with the “weakest” ones leaving in defeat.

To complete the tasks, the workers frequently draw on familial and social resources; thus, a less visible form of homework emerges in the downstream logistics chain. Brothers and sisters, as well as husbands and wives, are mobilized to help one another. This also happens when the concerned couriers are sick or injured. Supervisor Han, the self-styled “head of the big working family,” encourages support between couriers in the team. The unpaid labor involved in calling customers or wrapping parcels, for example, 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 have created a highspeed, digital ecosystem through partnering with contracted delivery firms and outsourcing of labor. In the form of independent contracting, Chinese migrant workers—who have to provide their own means of production at work—are exposed to the uncertainties imposed by the market and receive little in return
for it.

Cutthroat price wars have driven a sense of competition, if not hostility, between 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 tracking technologies. 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 of eight ministries (including the All-China Federation of Trade Unions) to protect couriers' rights and interests.

Migrant informal workers are doubly trapped in informal employment relations and an unequal citizenship regime segmented by rural/urban household registration status.[27] Future investigations of the themes emerging from this study would be worthwhile. 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 get 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, gender, and family, as well as rural–urban migration in fast-changing China and other societies.

Notes

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