



Fig. 1 (left): At the height of lunchtime rush in Huaqiang North, Shenzhen, delivery riders entrust the “last mile” of their deliveries to elderly assistants for the fee of 2 Yuan. (Photo by the author, 2024)

28/09/2024 Shenzhen

The urban matrix requires knowing eyes. All kinds of mundane street furniture line the sidewalk: locker shelves for mailed packages, food delivery parcels, and moped batteries, alongside charging stations for vehicles and courier stations. Once you recognize them, an entire layer of hidden infrastructure emerges like invisible ink, revealing the flowing river of China’s logistics network that powers its rapidly expanding e-commerce.

30/09/2024 Beijing West
A middle-class neighborhood where I stay

I see couriers delivering groceries every day. Each elevator features an LCD screen playing ads from Jingdong, one of China’s largest e-commerce platforms.

Supermarkets are rare. I spent an evening on Amap searching for laundry detergent offline, but found only produce markets and convenience stores. The only supermarket I managed to uncover—after traversing multiple highways, bridges, and many skyscrapers—was a dim basement shop in a rundown building. It felt like stepping into a Blade Runner-esque world, scavenging for relics of the past.

A Dispatch from China

Platform Economy, Labor Precarity, and Literary Voices

Chun Chun Ting (Isha)

A 2023 national survey reveals that 21 percent of the total workforce, or 84 million people, work in “new forms of employment,” mostly platform-based gig work: ride-hailing drivers, couriers, and food delivery riders.² Migrant workers with rural household registrations (*hukou* 户口) dominated these sectors. In local parlance, these three roles are dubbed the “triathlon” of contemporary jobs due to intensity and risk. Yet food delivery is considered the most hazardous, as riders are often seen rushing through red lights or driving against traffic, and featured in news stories about traffic accidents or sudden deaths from exhaustion. Investigations show how food couriers are trapped by tightening algorithms and unsustainable delivery paces.³ Amid China’s optimistic e-commerce narrative, workers’ struggle exposes deep contradictions of our time: triumph and failure, comfort and misery, speed and alienation.

In fall 2024, I returned to the Migrant Workers Home in Picun, Beijing, to continue my research on migrant workers’ literature. I made additional trips to observe the labor conditions shaped by the platform economy. Here are my initial reflections, with field notes and literature reviews.

Platform economy and gig workers in the food delivery service

A significant appeal of gig work lies in its alleged freedom and flexibility, especially when compared to the rigid discipline of factory work. However, as research shows, platforms employ various tools to

The exponential growth of platform economy is profoundly reshaping China’s urban landscape and its fabric of everyday life. To outside visitors, China can feel like an alien planet: Google, YouTube, Instagram, and other familiar tech tools are inaccessible; cash and credit cards are rarely accepted; and until recently, the prerequisites for plugging into the national network, a local SIM and bank account, were difficult to obtain. But once connected, everything flows seamlessly and instantaneously. Nearly all needs – from hailing taxis, ordering food, booking hotels, paying fees, to banking and shopping – can be, and in most cases are, conducted entirely through a single platform like WeChat or Alipay. The rapid monopolization of the daily lifeworld by the platform giants has been met with both exhilaration at the convenience they bring (and the perceived advancement of China compared to the West) and growing apprehension about the shifting labor conditions.¹

manufacture consent and impose meticulous control over the labor process. Algorithmic dispatch, ratings, and dynamic pricing are used to generate “just-in-time/place” labor.⁵ Meituan uses dispatching policies to favor full-time riders and squeeze out part-timers.⁶ Orders are preferentially directed to riders

who work over ten hours, avoid absences, reject few orders, deliver on time, and earn good reviews. Dynamic pricing further rewards diligence with higher fees per delivery. Customer tracking tools and labor subcontracting worsen job indignity and further erode protection.

These platform mechanisms keep riders in a state of dependency, precarity, over-exhaustion, and high injury risk. Half of riders report traffic accidents. Food delivery is hazardous: delivery windows have shrunk from 50 to 30 minutes between 2019 and 2023.⁷ In that window, riders must negotiate entry into shopping malls, office buildings, or gated communities (often barred to them), maintain ties with restaurants to expedite orders, determine the optimal sequence and route for chained deliveries, and stay in constant contact with restaurants, customers, and platforms. All this must be done while maneuvering through busy traffic across highways, pedestrian overpasses, and walkways – and managing battery swaps.

At the same time, late deliveries cost 50% of the fee, 70% if over 10 minutes. They also disrupt chained orders, lower on-time delivery rates, reduce rankings, and diminish fees for future orders.⁸ Ironically, while riders strain to deliver on time, the data from their GPS and labor processes are continuously fed into the algorithm to fix bugs, improve maps, optimize labor management, and ultimately achieve higher efficiency, i.e. cut delivery times further. As labor researcher Sun Ping argues, riders are “human batteries,” feeding data to perfect a system that exploits them.

26/09/2024, Shenzhen

I met my filmmaker friend Baik, who is working on a documentary about China’s platform economy. Together we visited Huaqiang North, home to tech giants like Tencent and Huawei, to observe the bustling scene of food delivery.

For riders employed in this area, lunch deliveries between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. to nearby offices are peak earning hours. In the shopping malls, they either waited outside restaurants or rushed between mall staircases, picking up multiple orders from eateries that primarily cater to delivery business. Navigating traffic on electric mopeds, riders were easily identifiable

by their Meituan’s yellow or Ele.me’s blue gears (the two dominant platforms) – though many skip it, as platforms do not provide them for free.

Outside office buildings, older adults collected deliveries for the final stretch. Wearing a QR code to accept payments, they called out building names, gathered orders from riders, and earned 2 Yuan per delivery. Instead of climbing stairs or waiting for elevators, which can be very time-consuming, riders outsource this task, keeping only 4 Yuan. I initially assumed the seniors were retirees, but the first one I spoke to turned out to be a hospital cleaner, skipping lunch to earn extra income.⁴



Fig. 2 (left): A migrant Didi driver who has spent over twenty years working in Beijing. (Photo by the author, 2024)

Migrant workers and labor precarity

Despite harsh conditions, workers continue to flock to the ranks of food delivery riders, Didi (China’s Uber) drivers, and couriers. China’s economic restructuring has sought to shift from the old export-oriented model to a growth regime driven by capital investment, technological innovation, and domestic consumption.⁹ Since the early 2010s, the manufacturing upgrade led to widespread unemployment among industrial workers. The rapid expansion of e-commerce and logistics displaced small entrepreneurs such as street vendors, shop owners, and distributors.¹⁰ Many of these displaced workers thus turned to the emerging gig economy.

The gig economy has become a catch-all sector for workers from diverse backgrounds. It attracts laid-off white-collar workers and fresh graduate (who often see it as temporary), yet migrant workers (with rural hukou) remain 75% of the force. Studies show that they tend to have a higher tolerance for precarity, remaining “sticky” on platforms despite excessive workloads and brutal exploitation.¹¹ In other words, while technological advancement and infrastructure upgrades are widely celebrated, what is overlooked is that migrant workers – whose precarity ensures the low cost and rapid speed of delivery – provide the essential labor without which the flourishing of the platform economy would be inconceivable.

27/09/2024, Shenzhen, 11pm

The Didi driver taking us home is from Sichuan province. In his 40s, he has worked in Shenzhen for over 20 years, starting on factory assembly lines before becoming a construction contractor. The real estate downturn pushed him into gig work four years ago. To earn more, he works both evening and morning rush hours, totaling 14 hours: from 4:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. and from 5:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Between 2:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m., he naps and charges his car at the city’s outskirts for cheaper electricity rates. After car rental and living cost, he sends home around 3,000 Yuan monthly.

Although the category of “migrant worker” remains powerful due to the specific link between migration and precarity, developments over the past 40 years have rendered it less stable. For example, the permanent exhibition at Migrant Workers Museum in Bao’an, Shenzhen – an official institution – includes engineers and entrepreneurs (who began not as factory workers but with education and capital) among its list of exemplary migrant workers.¹² Many migrant gig workers I interviewed were former entrepreneurs, such as shop owners or contractors, or held white-collar jobs. Some have even brought apartments on the outskirts of megacities, or in second- and third-tier cities, in order to acquire urban hukou and secure education for their children.

These discrepancies arise from both economic opportunities and policy reforms. In the 2000s, hukou reforms allowed for easier

rural-to-urban hukou transfers in smaller cities and limited access to education and healthcare services in megacities – provided that migrants contributed to local welfare system.¹³ While these changes fall short of universal welfare, they suggest the hukou system is gradually being replaced by class-based exclusion. As attested by Guangzhou native Hu Anyan, whose bestseller *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* 我在北京送快递 has positioned him as a spokesperson for gig workers today, precarious work is no longer exclusive to rural migrants but increasingly affects the urban working class.¹⁴ With the rise of the platform economy, precarity is increasingly shaped by economic power and social class, rather than place of origin.

Writing about gig work

As labor activism faces severe suppression in China, cultural expression has emerged as a vital avenue for precarious workers to represent themselves and reclaim dignity. In recent years, two worker-authors, nonfiction writer Hu Anyan and poet Wang Jibing, have garnered significant public attention. Both authors gained recognition through social media, which eventually led to book publications. Wang’s poetry collection, *Those Racing Against Time* 赶时间的人 (2023), delves into his experiences as a food delivery rider and his family life in both urban and rural settings.¹⁵ Hu’s *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* (2023) recounts his 19 jobs over two decades, with a focus on his time as a warehouse worker and parcel courier. A key factor in their popularity is the public’s curiosity about couriers – ubiquitous yet largely unheard figures. Compared to more established migrant worker-poets like Xu Lizhi, Zheng Xiaoqiong, or Chen Nianxi, these two works are more restrained in tone. Strikingly absent in both books are anger, criticism, or sarcasm, despite the frustrations inherent in a courier’s life. Instead, there is a palpable caution in their writing, as they navigate the need to avoid offending readers (who are also potential customers), platforms, or censors.

Yet sometimes the truth itself is critique enough. For instance, when Hu Anyan writes about his experience of time as a parcel courier, he provides an extraordinarily detailed account of his internal calculation of time versus money. To earn 7000 Yuan monthly, necessary to sustain a life in Beijing, he must work 26 days a month, 11 hours a day (including two unpaid hours of preparation). This breaks down to 270 Yuan per day, 30 Yuan per hour, or 0.5 Yuan per minute. At a rate of 2 Yuan per parcel, he can only afford to spend 4 minutes on each delivery. In this framework, even basic human needs become luxuries: a two-minute bathroom break costs 1 Yuan, and a 20-minute lunch costs 10 Yuan. To avoid such “expenses,” the only option is to skip meals and limit liquid intake.

Written in a matter-of-fact, emotionless tone, the meticulous recounting of numbers – which must be the mental calculation of every rider and courier – creates scale, speed, urgency, and stress, evoking both awe and a sense of absurdity at the tireless, robotic frenzy of this labor. In his calculations, Hu reduces his time to its monetary value: 0.5 Yuan per minute. Once this rate is established, the logic turns inward against oneself, measuring the cost of maintaining biological life. Acts of self-care, like eating or using the bathroom, no longer reflect a living being’s relationship with his own

physical body but are now mediated by currency. Social reproduction costs time, which is money, which is the time it takes to earn that money, which is, ultimately, a piece of one’s life. In other words, we consume our own lives to sustain life itself. This grim reality is underscored by Hu’s self-deprivation: to survive in Beijing, he must skip meals and limit water intake. Survival demands self-harm. Hu Anyan’s conversion of currency, time, bodily needs, and life exposes alienation at a material and corporal level: the domination of time and money over all social relations, including one’s relationship with oneself.

Time is the most dominating factor in gig labor. As Sun Ping observes, making people wait is an expression of power that differentiates service receivers from providers. Gig workers often perceive their time as “subaltern time” or “informal time”, excluded from structured work hours like the “9-to-5” model or paid overtime.¹⁶ This conception of time reflects gig workers’ submission to class hierarchy and explains their “stickiness” to remain on platform despite increasing unpaid waiting time.

However, Hu’s fastidious calculation reveals a stark truth: any form of customer service – whether spending time on the phone, making extra trips for redelivery, or accommodating special requests – consumes the courier’s life. They are obliged to work at a loss, no longer earning but paying with minutes of their life to keep the job. Recounting an exchange with a customer who asked him to “take a walk after dinner” to collect a returned parcel, Hu writes: “Making a trip to her neighborhood is not as idyllic as she suggested. It would take me a whole hour, enduring traffic noise and exhaust fumes... Why would I work an hour overtime to earn a 3.5 Yuan fee?... I want to suggest that she take a walk after dinner too and, while she’s at it, find a courier station to return the parcel herself.”¹⁷ Though Hu never made the suggestion, he also refused to make the trip. He treats his time as equal to the customer’s, rejecting the notion that his time is “informal” or “subaltern” and therefore expendable for unpaid labor.

At the end of this article, I want to consider a poem by Wang Jibing. “Please Forgive” 请原谅 is from the first section of *Those Racing Against Time*, which focuses on his delivery work. As previously noted, indignity is the hardest part of a rider’s laboring experience. Whether it is accusations of reckless driving, complaints about late deliveries or impolite behavior, being denied entry by security guards, or reprimands from platform managers for inefficiency or absence – riders often have no choice but to apologize. In the poem, Wang Jibing uses “please forgive” as a refrain to evoke the countless instances of forced apologies. But at its core, what riders apologize for is their resilience; their tireless labor and constant hustle to seize every gap and every second; their undignified existence, likened to ants or scars, inconvenient yet illuminating like a bolt of lightning; their unbroken inner strength, unvanquished yet tender, as they silently bear insults and utter endless apologies. The poem concludes on a somewhat clichéd optimistic note: “Please forgive the night / when all is cloaked in darkness, stars still shine / For the burden of existence never outweighs the value of life.”¹⁸ Yet if resilience demands forgiveness, it remains ambiguous whether we are meant to forgive the night’s darkness or the stars that persist within it. What is undeniable, however, is that the riders’ resilience offers incontrovertible evidence: life’s inherent worth forever eclipses the weight of existence.



Fig. 3: A delivery rider pauses to exchange his moped battery at a dedicated locker shelf designed for battery swaps. (Photo by the author, 2024)

As Sun Ping suggests, the subjectivity of gig workers is not so much revealed in moments of solidarity or organization (which are exceedingly rare) but in instances of being beaten, punished, or dismissed for failing to comply.¹⁹ This inverted manifestation of subjectivity, emerging in moments of defeat rather than uprising, is also at work here. The poem carries an implicit critique, yet it can only be articulated in the voice of one begging for forgiveness. Critique cannot afford to offend, not the censors, the platforms who control digital traffic and content visibility, nor the readers who, as consumers, equally benefit from the reckless exploitation of labor. This is our reality today.

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Notes

- 1 This is part of the research project “Cultures of Labor and the Labor of Culture in Contemporary China,” led by Paola Iovene and funded by a University of Chicago Provost’s Global Faculty Award.
- 2 “Quanguo xinjiuye xingtai laodongzhe da 8400wan ren” 全国新就业形态劳动者达8400万 [84 Million Workers Engaged in New Forms of Employment Nationwide], *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 [The People’s Daily], March 27, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/45344t95> (accessed Feb 10, 2025). Sun Ping’s book cites the 2023 total number of gig workers in China to be over 200 million, compared to about 73 million in the US. See Sun Ping 孙萍, *Guodu laodong: Pingtai jingji xia de waimai qishou* 过渡劳动：平台经济下的外卖骑手 [Transitional Labor: Food-delivery Workers in the Platform Economy of China] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2024), 11.
- 3 Lai Youxuan 赖祐萱, “Waimai qishou: kunzai xitong li” 外卖骑手：困在系统里 [Food Delivery Riders Trapped by Algorithms], *Renwu* 人物 [People Magazine], <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Mes1RqLOdp48CMw4pXTwXw> (accessed Feb10, 2025).
- 4 More on Huaqiang North, Shenzhen, see Fan Yang, “Back to the Future: A Walk through Huaqiangbei in 2025,” *Position: Politics*, March 17, 2025, <https://positionspolitics.org/fan-yang-back-to-the-future-a-walk-through-huaqiangbei-in-2025> (accessed March 26, 2025).
- 5 KJ Wells, K Attoh, and D Cullen, “‘Just-in-Place’ Labor: Driver Organizing in the Uber Workplace,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* (2021, 53:2), 315–331.
- 6 Sun, *Guodu laodong*, 97-103; 153-174. See also Ping Sun, Yujie Chen, & U Rani, “From Flexible Labour to ‘Sticky Labour’: A Tracking Study of Workers in the Food-Delivery Platform Economy of China,” *Work, Employment and Society* (2023, 37:2), 412-431.
- 7 Sun, *Guodu laodong*, 203.
- 8 *ibid*, 207.
- 9 BJ Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Adaptation and Growth* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2018). Cited by Zhou Yang, “Trapped in the Platform: Migration and Precarity in China’s Platform-based Gig Economy,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* (2024, 56:4), 1195-1210.
- 10 Zhou, “Trapped in the Platform,” 1202.
- 11 *ibid*.
- 12 I visited the museum on 22 October 2024.
- 13 Zhou, “Trapped in the Platform,” 1204.
- 14 Hu Anyan 胡安焉, *Wo zai Beijing song kuaidi* 我在北京送快递 [I Deliver Parcels in Beijing] (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 2023).
- 15 Wang Jibing 王计兵, *Ganshijian de ren* 赶时间的人 [Those Racing Against Time] (Beijing: Taihai chubanshe, 2023).
- 16 Sun, *Guodu laodong*, 200.
- 17 Hu, *Wo zai Beijing song kuaidi*, 58.
- 18 Author’s translation.
- 19 Sun, *Guodu laodong*, 141-153.