Gender and the Chinese Working Class

written by Zoe Zhao, Olia Shu | August 6, 2024

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For today's talk, I will focus primarily on the conditions of women workers and Olia will talk more about self-organization and NGOs. Some of the discussion will draw from my own fieldwork in China during the pandemic.

To understand gender relations in the Chinese working class today, we must first examine how production chains are organized. Beyond large factories, smaller-scale family-based workshops are the main suppliers for big e-commerce platforms in China. In China's e-commerce and fast fashion industry, which are increasingly integrated into the global supply chain with the rise of the two China-based online shopping platforms Shein and Temu, this model of family-based production has greatly intensified rather than weakened. Temu and Shein's profits are doing quite well. Part of the reason is that they intensify competition between smaller workshops and select the cheapest supplier, which also tends to have more exploitative labor practices.

Many family workshops cluster in urban villages with affordable rent and food costs, and workers sometimes live close to or even within their workshops. The issue with the family-based workshops is that they are more likely to reflect the existing gendered division of labor in traditional patriarchal families. For instance, within these workshops, women tend to shoulder the tasks of cooking, grocery shopping, and doing laundry for others, while men do more heavy lifting tasks such as operating and cutting "tables" (the large, flat surfaces used in the garment industry for laying out, measuring, and cutting fabric). Studies of garment workshops by Duke's Nellie Chu have shown that due to common oppression, female workers from different regions are more likely to bond with each other and even develop a sense of solidarity with female factory owners, which is quite different from male workers who are often segregated by their origin cities. Research by Lin Zhang of the University of New Hampshire reveals the marginalization of rural women weavers in e-commerce. They are in the lowest rank of the supply chain and can barely earn any profit.

Typically, feminized occupations pay less than masculine ones. Many service industries in urban areas, especially those newer ones such as bubble tea shops, attract young female workers who either want to stay closer to the urban lifestyle or are rejected by factories. I saw a job ad in a Shenzhen-based bubble tea shop in late 2020 that indicated 3800 RMB (around $526) as the starting salary for a new worker, which is much higher than the base salary of Shenzhen Foxconn (2650 RMB)—but does not offer overtime pay like factory work. And so, the actual take-home income and benefits are worse than those of factories. Many service industry workers vent about their working conditions on social media. Beyond describing the laborious nature of the work, they also say that the actual income can be much lower than promised, as small mistakes can result in extra penalties in pay.

Because of the rise of digital platforms and the shrinking pay in both factories and the urban service sector, platform workers, like in food delivery (with over 13 million workers now), occupy an increasingly significant part of the workforce in China, just as in most other countries. In Asia, platform food delivery is primarily a masculine job. However, female delivery workers have increased dramatically and nationally since the pandemic. Around 10 percent of food delivery workers in China are women, and the percentage is higher in large cities. Ping Sun's research group has estimated that the percentage of women delivery workers increased from 9 percent in 2020 to over 16 percent in 2021. Another interesting fact is that women are usually older than men because many have been laid off from the traditional service industry. Overall, women delivery workers also suffer from an income gap and more harassment from clients and other workers. For these reasons, many do not join online support groups that are self-organized by delivery workers, which are the main mode of communication among delivery workers in China.

There is also a notable gendered division of labor between onsite and virtual platform economies. Women are significantly more likely to work in virtual industries such as live-streaming and online customer service. Many women workers deem remote work to be a safer option. In my own research, many women acknowledge that rampant sexual harassment is one major factor that leads them to avoid working in onsite service jobs.

Another related trend is the absorption of rural female surplus labor into new supply chains. Women workers returning home to inner provinces such as Henan and Gansu are forming a key part of the data labeling industry that drives global AI production. Local governments promote many of these initiatives as part of poverty alleviation campaigns. With the high demand of global AI companies, this gendered "ghost" work will most likely continue to grow.

The rise of day labor in multiple large cities is one of the most contradictory trends of work feminization over the past decade. Most day laborers are male migrant workers. Many have given up on securing long-term or salary work. Instead, they gather in numerous labor markets, trying to secure gigs for a day or two and rest for the remainder of the week. Numerous video clips on social media, particularly on Douyin and Kuaishou, are about young male workers trying to broadcast their day labor experience.

However, there is an additional gendered dimension of day labor. Despite the higher representation of male workers, female workers are over-represented in labor agencies: they serve as mediators between male workers and hiring corporations. The rationale behind this is that the agency owners believe that women are better at communicating with men, and also, interestingly, that they could offer an illusion that there are many young women inside factories. One such labor agency is even named "Good Sisters Human Resource"!

China is also suffering from an aging workforce, and so we must also consider gender relations among older workers. The average age of the working population in urban and rural regions is increasing rapidly. A study by Yige Dong, a sociologist at the University of Buffalo, SUNY, on gig manufacturing shows that the percentage of unmarried young workers has decreased significantly. While Foxconn still recruits people under 40 or 45, the proportion of Foxconn's employees under 30 dropped from more than 90 percent to 48 percent. This is particularly true for factories in the inner provinces, as they attract workers from the same province. It is also more challenging for older workers to go on strike or protest as they have more to lose and more family members to worry about. Older workers face not only deteriorating health and occupational diseases but, more importantly, a hostile job market. Typically, female workers over 50 and male workers over 60 are unlikely to be hired.

I will end with some examples of hiring posters that I observed in a working-class neighborhood in

Yangpu District, Shanghai, in 2021. A majority of hiring ads ask only for women under the age of 40-50, and under 60 for men. One was explicitly looking for "women, 18-42 years old." When I tried to raise the issue of unequal pay and age discrimination at a job agency, I was told that "older women should feel grateful they can still work as nannies and caretakers," and I was then unceremoniously removed from an online group. One way for older workers to bypass the age limit is to buy fake identity cards on the illegal market. However, many migrant workers look older than their actual age due to years of drudgery, so they are more likely to be questioned by the police.

Olia Shu

Building on Zoe's remarks, I will mainly discuss the intersection between feminist organizing and workplace activism. Of course, simply looking at women workers will not give us a full picture of gender dynamics in the Chinese working class, but their experiences form a key part of the story when interrogating the dynamics of a capitalist system structured by patriarchy. It is no surprise that women tend to be more marginalized and vulnerable in their social lives and in the labor market. Chinese women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic labor, face more harassment in the workplace, and are paid less. While important documentaries and other footage of Chinese women workers' organizing are available—like *We the Workers* (2017) and *Outcry and Whisper* (2020)—they are seldom discussed in mainstream Chinese media and receive little public attention. They show instances of militant agitational organizing by women workers, but I also want to call attention to different nuanced models of organizing that have become increasingly prevalent as room for mobilization has become more difficult, with more severe consequences from state repression. Only very particular conditions allow for mass protests and other confrontations with the police and employers.

We must also consider the less flashy aspects of organizing by women workers that are crucial in workplace activism today. Older workers guiding younger ones, or workers speaking the same dialect from the same region, often self-organize small groups to support one another. These spaces provide key starting points for workers to figure out and bring up collective grievances and discover the confidence and agency to fight. Workers also use digital media to teach each other and circulate labor laws and other institutional tools. While some supportive lawyers, students, activists, and journalists often receive the most attention after workers' actions, everyday workers without a platform often face the most direct and harshest retaliation. Many workers are also teaching themselves how to organize and use the law to their own advantage, even though many do not have professional hats.

The Sunflower Service Center for Female Workers is a good example of these kinds of women workers' self-organizing. A few workers started the center in Guangzhou in 2011, wanting to collaborate to provide childcare and host various recreational and cultural activities. Guangzhou had over a hundred thousand women workers, and the center hosted many popular cultural events and won attention from local media, even receiving official endorsements for these events. One event invited men and women workers to wear red women's shoes publicly to promote awareness of gender issues in the workplace. Eventually, workers at Sunflower began cultivating more legal knowledge and collective power, and workers at the center were soon advising each other on how to negotiate successfully with companies around issues of wage theft. Word about the center began to spread. At one point, over a thousand workers who had worked at a local toy factory for over 20 years failed to receive their full compensation and social security benefits upon reaching retirement age. They contacted the Sunflower Center, which helped them win an important lawsuit that same year against the company.

Thus, Sunflower began moving from cultural activities toward militant actions in the early 2010s, eventually leading to its repression. Since the toy factory workers' case, it began facing more direct

and indirect pressure from authorities and other actors to shut down. At one point, the landlord started shutting off their water and electricity; another morning, organizers discovered that someone had welded their metal door to the frame so they could not open it. Local authorities eventually gave the representatives of the Sunflower Center an ultimatum: either close down themselves or wait for an official notice to shut down. By 2015, they were forced to shut down.

While militant organizing became increasingly persecuted after 2015, some centers for women workers continued to survive and worked through more subtle and creative avenues. Ding Dang, for one, is a co-founder of the Green Roses Center of Social Work, which still exists in Shenzhen today. She was a worker-leader who began to work when she was 14 and had to drop out of school to work to provide for her family. She moved from her rural hometown of Gansu to the urban center of Shenzhen, where she experienced the plight of working in large industries, something that later informed her organizing. After reading and learning more about labor and social issues at a workers' center, she identified gender as a key concern that shaped her and other female colleagues' labor conditions. She discovered that six out of the ten members of her friend group at work had faced abandonment by their parents because of their gender. She began to understand that factories liked hiring women because they thought women workers would be easier to manage. She noticed that though many of her female co-workers were usually quiet in public, they shared their thoughts quite openly with each other privately. She continued encouraging other co-workers to find ways to speak out, creating her magazine and other forms of public content.

The Green Roses Center of Social Work that Ding founded hosts activities like a "Mother's Day singing performance" and "Bread and Roses poetry exhibition," centered on women workers, alongside various childcare and mutual aid work for migrant workers to better adapt to city life. Green Rose also effectively uses digital platforms to reach workers, such as through their public accounts on WeChat, Weibo, or Xiaohongshu.

Indeed, as Zoe mentioned, digital platforms are becoming an increasingly important organizing tool for Chinese women workers. Worker-activists are moving from traditional newspapers, magazines, and online blogs to more decentralized models of reporting and expression, such as through social media. Some produce short-form content, while others produce longer newsletters, podcasts, and documentaries—all to find ways to bypass the prevalent state-imposed censorship on Chinese social media. Da Gong Tan, for example, conducts interviews with workers from diverse backgrounds, featuring domestic workers from local factories and international graduate workers in the United States. Audio recordings, the use of pseudonyms, and private email subscriptions are some ways to bypass censorship. Workers' blogs like Spicy Pepper or Jianjiao Bu Luo circulate and comment on relevant statistics, with charts showing for example that birth rates for women are declining or that women are migrating into cities more than men.

Women truck drivers, like Li Xin, have started vlogs on a platform called Kuai Shou to call attention to their working conditions. Li documents her own life as a truck driver and a mother of two who drives around to work with her husband, and she can only go home once every few months. Such stories gain traction among other drivers and others on social media. So, more and more workers rely on digital platforms to discuss their working conditions. Some cases catch government attention and are co-opted into state narratives that glorify their "sacrifices" without doing much to change workers' social support and long-term security. Li later became more integrated into official media, participating in a famous singing contest, and had to moderate her content away from agitation, even as she invited other truckers on her platform to share about their working conditions, including a case of a worker dying in a traffic accident. There is not much more she is allowed to safely express, besides the kind of sentiment that she ended with in a recent vlog: "reality is cruel, but life has to go on."

We must also remember that digital and broader literacy is not entirely common among female workers yet, and so key work for Green Rose and other labor groups is designing different kinds of writing and media literacy workshops. One literacy class teaches women how written characters pictorially correspond to different parts of the body, allowing them to discuss general concepts of wellness, health, and maternal care.

I want to conclude by emphasizing that the precarity of workers' conditions in China means there is no one-size-fits-all model for organizing workers. Activists must navigate harsh conditions to meet people where they are with limited resources and the constant threat of repression.

This Article is part of a special section on labor in China:
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• The State of Labor Resistance and Repression in China, Julie Liu and Roy Li
• Gender and the Chinese Working Class, Zoe Zhao and Olia Shu
• Labor Solidarity Through Supply Chains: Foxconn and the U.S. Labor Movement, Zhang Mazi
• Between Chinese Surveillance and Israeli Settler Colonialism, Palestine Solidarity Action Network
• Activists on U.S.-China Labor Solidarity, Ellen David Friedman, Alex T. Tom, and Kevin Lin, moderated by Andrew Sebald