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The shifting forms of livelihood strategies of platform workers in China

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Empirical research has found that platform workers have adopted both collective actions and informal practices to address unfavorable working conditions. However, the “small scale geographies” of platform work as well as the inter-linkage of shifting forms of resistance is under-explored. This paper aims to broaden and deepen our understanding of resistance from platform workers, through a case study of app-based delivery drivers in Shanghai, China. As responses to precarity, drivers have resorted to both open, collective actions and more hidden everyday practices. Because of surveillance by the Chinese state and the close managerial control of workers, collective protests have been rarely seen and of limited effectiveness; more individual and quiet practices such as dissimulating data are favored by drivers in their everyday resistance. We argue that the intention to resist on the part of drivers echoes and expands Bayat’s (2000) observations on the survival techniques of the urban poor, and differs from the ‘political act’ argued by Scott. It is hard to conclude that the drivers’ everyday resistance can provoke dramatic confrontation in China as Scott’s arguments would lead us to suppose. It contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the platform economy by highlighting the unique modalities and strategies of delivery drivers in China, which differs significantly from those in Western contexts that are often addressed in the existing literature. Our study sheds light on the specific forms of struggle against the asymmetric power of platforms and provides new insights into the mechanisms of resistance.

Keywords: resistance, platform work, China, protest, livelihood strategies

Introduction

Due to low entry barriers and high work flexibility, gig jobs from platforms or apps are increasingly attracting low-skilled migrant workers, and digital platform economies are growing rapidly in China. With online food delivery platform companies such as Meituan and Eleme thriving, app-based delivery drivers, couriers and ride-hailing drivers can be found in almost every corner of Chinese big cities. Interacting with existing infrastructures and environments, platforms are now “transforming the way urban is governed and experienced through technology” (Mezzadra et al., 2024, p. 6). Recent studies have shown that while their platform workers enjoy more work flexibility, more subtle and sophisticated labor monitoring such as algorithmic control is exerted (Wood et al., 2019). At the same time, the platform workers have adopted a variety of both collective actions and informal practices as tools to address digital constraints limiting their autonomy (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Popan et al., 2023). As Vinthagen and Johansson argue, “resistance is always situated, in a context, a historic tradition, a certain place and/or social space forged by those who rebel” (2013, p. 14).

Within existing research on resistance from platform workers, while much focus has been on high income countries, researchers are beginning to better understand the resistance patterns beyond the global North (Anwar & Graham, 2020a, b). A global analysis of worker protest in digital labor platforms has found that in Europe traditional unions play an important part in platform labor unrest while workers rely more on self-organized groups in China where independent trade unions are prohibited (Bessa et al., 2022).

In this article, we examine how app-based delivery drivers protect and sustain themselves in Shanghai as platform workers. We focus on drivers from the three biggest delivery platforms in Shanghai: Eleme, Meituan, and Shansong. Collective actions and protests have been found among Uber drivers in Washington, food delivery drivers in the UK and Italy (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020; Well et al., 2021). Distinct from the collective resistance among platform workers in western countries, labor contention in China is impacted by “an increasingly constrained political environment and a high degree of online censorship” (Liu & Friedman, 2021, p. 68). Research conducted by Lei (2021) and Liu and Friedman (2021) would suggest that collective action by food delivery drivers in China would be an unlikely event. However, they only focus on “moments of collectivism and solidarity” (Lei, 2021, p. 305) while tending to overlook worker agency “that is not articulated as collectively organized” (Lier, 2007, p. 829), the “quiet, largely atomized” (Bayat, 1997b, p. 57), and “non-collective but prolonged direct action by individuals” referred to by Bayat (2000, p. 536). Furthermore, as Lilja et al. (2017) argue, the interlinkage and connection between different forms of resistance are underexplored.

To fill this gap, this article aims to answer the following questions: How do delivery drivers in China resist their working platforms and protect themselves? How should we understand the complexity, fluidity and effectiveness of their resistance in the Chinese context? And how should we interpret the interplay/relation between different forms and practices of resistance? We firstly document two protests organized by Shansong delivery drivers in October 2019, and reflect on the effectiveness and intention of the protests. Building on Scott’s (1985) notion of “everyday resistance”, we further argue that through using three main techniques (i.e. networking with customers privately, making fake orders and preemptively registering the completion of an order), the delivery drivers have the capacity to reshape their working circumstances and processes. Revealing the motivation and nexus of different forms of resistance from Shanghai app-based delivery drivers, we challenge Scott’s neat dichotomy between public resistance and everyday resistance, and the political consciousness behind the resistance. In doing so, this article contributes to existing literature on labor geography and labor resistance by filling two research gaps.

Firstly, compared to a prime focus on trade unions and “success stories” (Lier, 2007), this research uses a “history from below” approach (Featherstone & Griffin, 2016) to analyze the labor agency from platform workers. As McDowell’s critique of existing literature on labor geography shows, there is a lack of engagement with “individual workers”, and the need to unpack “people’s lives, diverse spaces within which lives are situated, expectations and motivations of labour, conditions that

influence people's decisions, often get lost in the larger tales of struggles" (2015, p. 2). Paying more attention to individual platform workers, rather than a "manly tale of institutional regulation and workers' struggles" (Dutta, 2016, p. 1), this article aims to reveal "small scale geographies" of Shanghai app-based delivery drivers' livelihood strategies, or in Dutta's words, "the everyday geographies of labour and the complexities of the 'social being' in trying to understand workers motivations and responses" (2016, p. 1).

Secondly, within the existing literature on labor resistance, as Lilja et al. argue, "few researchers ... have elaborated on the inter-linkage of shifting forms of resistance" (2017, p. 40). Scott indicates that "everyday resistance might transform into large scale, collective and organized resistance", and does not explain "how these forms of everyday hidden practices develop into public transcripts and vice versa" (Arubayi, 2021, p. 835). Through analysis of two explicit protests as well as the everyday forms of resistance among app-based delivery drivers in Shanghai, this research challenges the "*linear development dynamics*" (Lilja et al., 2017, p. 44) and Scott's argument that resistance springs from class consciousness. In this vein, this research extends Bayat's study on urban poor who are motivated by "the force of necessity—the necessity to survive and live a dignified life" (1997b, p. 58).

The remainder of this paper is organized in four sections. First, we situate this research within labor agency scholarship and Scott's conceptualization of "everyday form of resistance". We then detail the research methods. Subsequently, the resistance from Shanghai app-based delivery drivers, including both public resistance and everyday resistance, is explored. The fourth section presents the conclusion, which summarizes the research findings and reflects on the application of everyday resistance on app-based delivery drivers in Shanghai.

Labour agency from platform workers

As a sub-discipline of human geography, labor geography has emerged over the past two decades with an emphasis on workers as playing a proactive role and reshaping the geographies of capitalism (Herod, 1997). From 2000, labor geography literature has broadened out into new sectors, new paths of action, and new modes of organization (Hastings, 2016). This means that labor agency not only includes workers' collective organizing efforts, but also includes their individual life choices, "less celebratory, ethical or successful forms of coping with labor market challenges" (Hastings, 2016, p. 307). Here, labor agency is about more than resistance to capitalism; it highlights "the importance of people's everyday life practices and their impact on their respective working conditions" (Grenzdörffer, 2021). Recently, scholars have called for more attention to be paid to non-unionized acts or even workers' everyday acts of 'getting by', especially outside the Anglo-American world (Lier, 2007). Through looking beyond "the success stories, and overcom[ing] certain biases in the geographical and empirical scope of our research agenda", labor geography can work better as a toolbox for analysis (Lier, 2007, p. 830).

With the emergence of platform-based worker struggles, labor geography, which had predominantly been applied in relation to factory work (Dutta, 2020), has been

applied as a robust tool box to analyze the agency of platform workers (Well et al., 2021). Empirical studies have begun to find that workers can resort to collective actions, acting back on the technologies they confront (Lynch, 2020). Mapping labor unrest in the food delivery sector in 36 countries, Stuart et al. (2020) find that although notable variations exist according to region, platform workers have organized strikes and log-offs, demonstrations and legal action to defend their interests. Vandaele's (2018) research on food couriers in Western Europe finds that platform workers' associational power is enhanced through direct action. Nevertheless, platform labor's solidarity faces significant challenges such as the legal, spatial, organizational, technological, and social aspects of fragmentation (Heiland, 2020).

In addition, platform workers have expressed their labor agency through a variety of sophisticated informal practices and tools to address the digital constraints limiting their autonomy. Drawing on Scott (1990)'s notion of "hidden transcripts", Anwar and Graham (2020a) demonstrate that remote workers in Africa can exercise agency in resistance through sharing computers and accounts and buying reviews on platforms. Within the context of online freelancers from the Upwork platform, Sutherland et al. (2020) show that remote workers develop the know-how to work with algorithms and procedures by adopting creative strategies. Chen (2018)'s study of Didi drivers in China finds that 40% of them use digital strategies such as bots or owning multiple phones to subvert the algorithm. Mustika and Savirani (2021)'s research on app-based motorcycle taxi drivers in Indonesia finds that ghost accounts, multiple accounts, and account therapy are used in their everyday work to obtain more orders and more income. Adopting the concept of everyday resistance, Arubayi explains how ride-hailing drivers in Lagos practice sabotage through "manipulating algorithms and false compliance by gaming spaces for rewards or bonuses" (2021, p. 828). In summary, research on ride-hail drivers and remote workers makes it clear that they are not passive receivers of algorithm controls; on the contrary, they have multiple ways of interacting with the algorithms and carving out zones of autonomy.

Although resistance in China is tightly controlled, labor protests, especially from laid-off workers in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), factory workers, and construction workers, are widely documented (Pun and Lu, 2010). Within platform work, according to the China Labour Bulletin, since 2011, app-based food delivery drivers and couriers have organized 111 strikes and protests.¹ However, the existing literature on resistance from platform labor in China tends to focus more on one type of labor agency – collective action and strikes (Liu & Freidman, 2021; Lei, 2021). Informed by Dutta's (2016) and McDowell (2015)'s call for a focus on "the everyday geographies of labour", this research concentrates on informal and everyday forms of resistance.

Labor agency beyond protest: everyday forms of resistance

We understand labor agency to include both collective actions and informal, individual actions. A helpful way to interpret labor agency in platform work is through Scott's concept of "everyday form of resistance". As Lata et al. have argued, workers beyond the Global North often exhibit an alternative form of resistance: "overt or collective resistance is not possible due to prevailing political and cultural arrangements" (2019,

p. 143) and “resistance and rebellion are too costly for the poor” (2019, p. 149). Similarly, Scott argues that it is a “simple fact that most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity” (1985, p. xv); peasant rebellions and peasant revolutions are “few and far between” (1985, p. xvi), especially in contexts where rebellion is too dangerous, or where there are constraints on the ability of some people to take open, formal action.

Compared to “the open defiance that dominates the study of peasant and working-class politics” (1985, p. 32), Scott argues that Malaysian farmers’ practices represent an “everyday” resistance. He finds that the relatively powerless groups – peasants – resisted the ongoing “Green Revolution” by “passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion, and deception” (1985, p. 31). This “everyday form of resistance” is distinguished from outright collective defiance which was widely popularized in previous resistance literature. Everyday techniques are “small scale”, “relatively safe”, “typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms” (Scott, 1985, p. 29), and “require little or no formal coordination” (Scott, 1985, p. 35). Scott concludes that “this is a social movement with no formal organization, no formal leaders, no manifestoes, no dues, no name, and no banner” (Scott, 1985, p. 35). In short, everyday resistance is a spontaneous, non-hierarchical and loosely organized resistance, which is typically hidden, disguised, and individual.

The concept of “everyday resistance” provides a new approach to understanding resistance and has received increasing attention in different disciplines such as geography, cultural studies, and political science. An influential approach is Katz’s (2004) distinction between *resilience*, *reworking*, and *resistance* strategies as three everyday practices of workers. In China, building on Scott’s work, O’Brien and Li (2006) find that protests in rural China takes the form of rightful resistance, which has a certain affinity with Scott’s everyday resistance. These two forms of defiance are both “opportunistic and measured and... they almost always lack ... organizational resources and collective consciousness” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 34). In the context of rural China, rightful resistance, although often noisy, public, and open, is more effective than everyday resistance (O’Brien, 2013).

However, there are two main critiques of the “everyday resistance” concept. Firstly, Scott is criticized for overemphasizing the differences between two main forms of resistance—everyday resistance and public resistance. Gutmann suggests the binary perception of resistance leads to a backward tendency in academia: “scholars following this framework must choose between covert and overt forms of subaltern politics” (1993, p. 76). Due to the widening disparities between everyday resistance and open confrontation raised by Scott, some distinctive characteristics of the “everyday resistance” concept are also challenged. Gutmann (1993) questions why “everyday forms of resistance” need necessarily be hidden. Gupta (2001) finds that poor peasants and agricultural laborers participate in mass, large-scale, and overt revolt. Holmes (2007) similarly argues that rather than finding resistance in more subtle and hidden acts such as slander, more overt acts such as marches and petitions are also highlighted. In this vein, Bayat proposes that the resistance from marginalized groups can be summarized as “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”, which is a “dialectic of individual

and collective action” (1997b, p. 66), marked by “quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action” (1997b, p. 57).

Another related critique is around the relationship between these two forms of resistance. In Scott’s metaphor, he appears to indicate that everyday forms of peasant resistance may lay the groundwork for substantial social change making an utter shambles of “the ship of state” (Scott, 1989, p. 20). As Lilja et al. summarize, Scott shows “*linear development dynamics*, in which everyday resistance might transform into large scale, collective and organized resistance” (2017, p. 44).

Critics have reminded us that a neat dichotomy between everyday and public resistance should be avoided and have shown the inter-linkage between different resistance forms. Using two cases in Cambodia, Lilja et al. find that “organized resistance could encourage everyday resistance” (2017, p. 52). Johansson and Vinthagen further argue that considering the complexity of sociological dimensions of everyday resistance, “everyday resistance” is “*heterogeneous and contingent* due to changing contexts and situations” (2016, p. 418). In this sense, everyday resistance is only one of many types of small-scale or individual resistance practices, and it goes on between or alongside dramatic resistance events.

The second critique concerns the intention and motivation of resistance. Influenced by Marxist historians, Scott’s explanation is still confined in terms of class analysis, accepts social consciousness, and indicates that resistance is a political and rational action. However, this assumption is challenged by later resistance literature, because it simplifies the ideas of peasants as arising neatly from their class position. Drawing attention to the meaning and intent of resistance, Bayat questions whether everyday acts are intended to affect social or political change. In Bayat’s understanding, the resistance often starts “without much political meaning attached to it” (1997a, p. 7). Whether they be social movements or everyday resistance, the acts are related to “the purpose of creating a more self-regulated and dignified life”: “their activities not as a deliberate political act; rather, they are driven by the force of necessity -- the necessity to survive and improve a dignified life” (Bayat, 2000, p. 547). “Scott’s implicit subscription to rational choice theory”, according to Bayat, “would overlook the complexity of motives behind this type of struggle” (1997a, p. 6). For Bayat, the motivations of resistance are not rooted in Scott’s class consciousness, but in attempts “to survive hardships and better their lives” (1997b, p. 57). Therefore, resistance is a particular kind of act of necessity without political intent or effect. After introducing the methods used in this research, the article moves on to consider how the experiences of Shanghai app-based delivery drivers play out against these two critiques of the concept of everyday form of resistance, the relationship between two forms of resistance and the motivation behind acts of resistance.

App-based delivery drivers and their online groups

The fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted from the start of October 2019 to mid January 2020, and from April 2020 to May 2020. In February and March 2020, fieldwork was suspended because of the Covid-19 outbreak, which greatly impacted everyone’s daily life in 2020. Boosted initially by favorable policies,

Shansong, Meituan, and Eleme, as typical actors in the platform economy, have been developing and becoming ever more popular in China. Until 2019, Shansong platform has provided a one-for-one delivery service (including documents, fresh food, and daily necessities) in 222 cities, attracting more than 800,000 drivers. From 2011 to 2019, the market size of the online food-ordering industry increased from RMB 21.68 billion to RMB 577.93 billion. Eleme and Meituan, the two giant food-ordering platforms in Shanghai, lead the online food-ordering industry in China with a 65.1% and 32.8% market share respectively in 2019.² The Chinese government has tended to look favorably on these privately-owned companies because of their capacity to absorb surplus labor by providing employment. Lax regulation has caused the dominance of big companies, the monopolization of the platform economy, and the vulnerability of low-skilled platform workers. After a period of cooperation, a shift is under way. The fines imposed by the State Administration for Market Regulation on the big platform companies since 2021 are regarded as heralding a sweeping crackdown across the e-commerce sector and a clampdown on giant platform companies. Currently, the Chinese antitrust watchdog's official brief is "supporting, standardizing, and guiding the sustainable and healthy development of the platform economy".³

During the two periods of fieldwork in Shanghai, we conducted 41 in-depth individual interviews and nine group discussions (five face-to-face and four online) with delivery drivers from the three platforms. There is no overlap between individual and group discussion interviewees. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of individual interviewees. Notably, all interviewees were men, and are often referred to as "takeaway lads" (*waimai xiaoge*). Very few women in China undertake this type of work; it is considered to be too arduous and tiring. Interviews and group discussions were semi-structured, including questions revolving around participants' attitude to their work platforms, the problems they meet during work, and their livelihood strategies. Participants were identified through both online and face-to-face methods. Because of the relatively low price and the common dining areas, drivers frequent small restaurants and food courts in the city center to eat lunch and have a rest during the afternoon (usually 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.). By visiting these restaurants and food courts on a regular basis and sometimes eating there, we tried to build trust and develop friendship with the delivery drivers. Because some of them were roommates, friends, relatives, or home-town peers, these drivers were eating lunch, smoking, talking, or playing mobile games together, and we joined in their conversation after obtaining consent, introducing the purpose of the research. It should be noted that Shansong drivers may also use the Meituan or Eleme platforms when they cannot receive sufficient income from the Shansong platform. However, most drivers from these three platforms do not have other sources of income apart from the online delivery industry.

TABLE 1 Here

For platform workers who are mobile and fragmented, online groups and Internet forums play an important part in their life (Wood et al., 2018). In China, most delivery drivers are actively engaged in social media, especially WeChat and QQ, two popular

online chatting platforms, and Weibo, the Chinese equivalent to X (Twitter). After searching the key words “Shanghai delivery driver” in Baidu Tieba, an online forum, two WeChat groups and three QQ groups were easily found and successfully joined by the lead author by scanning their QR code. During October 2019, drivers heatedly discussed the two protests against the Shansong platform in these QQ and WeChat groups. The information derived from online groups was organized into four online group discussions. The length of interviews and group discussions was between 20 and 60 minutes, depending on the drivers’ convenience.

Participant observation was used when researchers joined two protests by Shansong drivers in October 2019. Once the lead author had heard about the protest from the drivers’ QQ and Wechat groups, she got permission from one of the organizers to be present and observe the protest. Because of the political sensitivity of collective action in China, the two protests were more like sit-in demonstrations. The relatively quiet and peaceful setting provided the opportunity to chat with the protesters to better understand their feelings of solidarity and the bargaining process with the platform. Secondary data were collected from government policy documents, the census, media reports, and other non-academic reports, and from observations and reflections on the daily work and life of delivery drivers.⁴

Shanghai app-based delivery drivers’ resistance

Collective actions

Delivery drivers from the Shansong platform in Shanghai organized two protests in October 2019. Before the protests, two causes of discontent at Shansong had been brewing among drivers. The main complaint was unfair order distribution between full-time and freelance drivers in the platform. After March 2019, Shansong had been recruiting a large number of full-time drivers through agencies. Compared to freelance drivers, these full-time drivers face more regulations from Shansong company: at least eight working hours every day, twenty-eight working days a month, and the wearing of work uniforms. These newly recruited drivers were given the privilege of receiving more orders. Consequently, freelance drivers had fewer orders to deliver. In QQ and WeChat groups, Shansong freelance drivers argued that orders should be evenly distributed to all working drivers, not to a small group of drivers; also, the distribution should be based on the drivers’ work performance rather than work type (full-time and freelance). This is because, they argued, some freelance drivers work harder and can finish more orders than full-time drivers but cannot receive enough orders from Shansong platform because they are freelance.

To encourage newly recruited full-time drivers to join in the protests, another long-term complaint – the low delivery fee drivers earn – was also proposed by protestors. The sum drivers earn from delivering one order is based on the delivery distance and the package weight. However, the calculation of distance is based on direct distance on the map, rather than the real distance in practice. This is problematic in Shanghai, where the Huangpu River divides the city into west and east, linked by several bridges. For instance, as shown in Figure 1, when delivering from point A to point B, the real

distance (blue line, following roads and bridges) is much longer than the direct distance (red line, crossing the river directly).

FIGURE 1 Here: The difference between direct distance in map (red line) and travelled distance (blue line). Source: Google Map.

The first protest in Shanghai (24 October 2019) was significantly encouraged by a similar protest in Beijing. Some Shanghai drivers had previously worked in Beijing or had hometown peers, relatives, and friends in Beijing. This means that some Shanghai drivers were also active in Beijing drivers' QQ and Wechat groups. On 23 October 2019, Beijing drivers protested outside Shansong's headquarters against what they saw as the unfair order distribution between full-time and freelance drivers. When the protest video and pictures spread online, Shanghai drivers had a heated discussion in their QQ and WeChat groups. Most of them supported the Beijing collective action but harbored doubts about the outcome of the protest. These doubts were, however, soon dispelled when Shansong platform in Beijing published an announcement that orders would be evenly distributed between full-time and freelance drivers, with all orders appearing on drivers' apps. During and after the Beijing protest, Shanghai drivers exchanged information with and absorbed tactics from Beijing drivers such as how to challenge the Shansong platform.

Their successful protest was celebrated by Beijing drivers, and it brought hope to Shanghai drivers. In their QQ and Wechat groups, the common belief among Shanghai drivers was that "things changed in Beijing after the protest. So if we do not protest, we will be bullied by platforms forever" (group interview, 23 October 2019). Drivers discussed how to organize their fellow Shanghai drivers and how to mobilize drivers' discontent legally. In the night of 23 October, just two hours after the Beijing announcement, Shanghai drivers shared their protest time and location in their WeChat and QQ groups – at 10:30 a.m. on 24 October at 188 Qinzhou North Road, Shansong's head office in Shanghai. To motivate more drivers to recognize powerful movements of ordinary people, peasant movements in history (among them the Taiping Rebellion of the mid 19th century) were quoted by drivers in the Wechat and QQ groups. Emotional words such as "dignity", "human rights", "exploitation", and "your brothers and sisters" were used in promoting their protest, but at the same time, a cautious tone was sounded with words such as "safeguarding rights legally and reasonably", and "parking our bikes in an orderly way" were also highlighted. The call for action included the following words: "This action is totally voluntary; no one is organizing or leading it". Put differently, in a context where organized groups are politically sensitive there were no structured groups or labor unions representing workers' interests (Chen, 2020).

The lead author of this article, alerted through her participation in the online groups, witnessed the events in Shanghai. Several drivers started gathering from the publicized time of 10:30 in front of Shansong's office. Most drivers were late, with several admitting in QQ and Wechat groups that they wanted to deliver orders before joining the action; some drivers worried about legal problems and personal safety issues, while other drivers texted that the protest would be legal and peaceful because there would be no banners and no violent actions. By 11 a.m., about 200 drivers had gathered

at the gate of Shansong's office. This is a small portion of the approximately 18,000 app-based delivery drivers in Shanghai. Six representatives from protesters were selected to enter talks with Shansong officials, and most drivers just waited outside the building. Since the Shansong office is situated at one corner of a crossroads, most protesters gathered and waited just outside the office building while some drivers gathered at each of the other three corners. It would be hard to assess whether they were actually protesting or not: if the "mainstream" protesters needed them, they could join in and support them, but for most of the time on 24 October, they just sat on their bikes, smoked, and observed the opposite corner. When we asked whether they had come here to protest, one driver said: "You can say yes and you can also say no. If there will be suitable orders, I will click on the app and deliver them". Conversations with drivers present at the site of the protest revealed that most were full-time drivers, new to Shansong, or had other income sources (for example, working for Meituan or Eleme). With a relatively low motivation for protesting, staying in nearby corners at a close distance gave them the space to move forward and join the protest or move back and leave the protest without anyone noticing too much.

The six representatives finished discussions and left the Shansong office later in the day. They announced that the results of their talks would be made public on 30 October once Shansong leaders had come to Shanghai and discussed with local company officers. Most drivers, who had already waited outside the building for half a day, appeared dissatisfied with this result. However, they left the protest location and agreed that they would come back in five days' time.

On 30 October 2019, Shanghai drivers organized the second protest and returned to Shansong's office. However, in contrast to the first event, mobilization was not widely shared in drivers' QQ and Wechat groups. It appears that information was shared only among drivers who participated in the first protest on 24 October. Therefore, the number of those joining the second protest decreased significantly. With three security staff (*baoran*) on hand, most drivers were sitting outside the office building, just as they had a few days previously, but they remained much quieter. Interviews with drivers found that although they did not fully trust their representatives, most drivers had wanted to avoid being chosen as a representative because of the potential of "damage" to their Shansong record.

On the afternoon of 30 October, it became clear that the protestors in Shanghai had only achieved one aim: the order distribution would be fair between full-time and freelance drivers. However, other complaints from drivers were not met; for instance, the calculation of delivery fee was still to depend on direct distance drawn on the map.

Subsequent group discussion indicated that the main outcome of these two protests was a loss of trust in the effectiveness of protest action. Several drivers even doubted whether the order distribution would be made fairer because of what they saw as a lack of information concerning the order distribution system. "No one can ensure the order distribution will be truly fair. Can we believe Shansong's words?" (group interview, 30 October 2019). Drivers' online comments indicated that they believed that the protest was of limited effect and help. Their low bargaining power could not be changed by protests; if they still wanted to work and earn money in this industry, they should obey

the rules and accept decreasing rates of pay. After the protest, in their QQ and WeChat groups, even though the drivers were still complaining about their current job and talking about changing to another job, they continued working for the Shansong platform. In their everyday life, they were resorting to everyday forms of resistance to engage in games with their working platforms.

“Everyday resistance” of Shanghai delivery drivers

Although drivers are facing strict algorithmic controls⁵ in their everyday work (Griesbach et al., 2019), they are not always passive receivers of every order from their apps. Drivers are often skilled at finding loopholes in their working regulations and working outside or at the very margins of these regulations. Three techniques are commonly shared among drivers: to increase their income, drivers use their personal network with customers and bypass the platforms; to upgrade their rank⁶ and get more bonuses, drivers make fake orders; to deal with short delivery times, drivers sometimes preemptively register the completion of an order on their apps.

a. Networking with customers privately

Normally, Shanghai app-based delivery drivers get orders in two ways: by distribution via the system (*pai dan*) or by checking on the system (*qiang dan*). However, if they cannot get enough orders from platforms or if they are not satisfied with the delivery fees from an order, drivers can develop personal relationships with customers after repeated interactions. Experienced drivers will use other communication technologies to bypass the platforms and finish an order delivery. Other personal communication mediums (such as WeChat and AliPay) can guarantee instant online chat and payment. In fact, this practice often starts with special requests from customers after placing an order to Meituan or Eleme. For instance, customers might call the delivery driver to ask whether they could buy a non-food item, for example, cigarettes, when delivering food for them. Gradually, a bond between customer and driver is formed, and the food-ordering platforms no longer play a role.

Because this can lead to more pay in the pocket without platform surveillance, delivery drivers attempt to maintain personal relationships with customers. For customers, drivers can deliver personal orders faster because intermediary services are eliminated. For the drivers, they then have the freedom to deliver anything from any restaurant in Shanghai even though these restaurants may not use Meituan or Eleme. Interviewees 3, 8, and 12 work with their clients closely through WeChat communications, earning more from their one-to-one delivery fees. Customers are willing to contact them because specific needs can be satisfied. Zhang, a 28-year old male driver, explained this as follows:

The platforms are becoming bigger and bigger. They take most of the profits. So now we start delivering things for customers privately, not through Eleme or Meituan. Sometimes, the orders distributed by the platforms are not good. I have several customers' WeChat contacts and seldom use the platforms. Some of the drivers also know the vendors in the seafood market, and are responsible for delivering seafood and fruits for them. For

example, I earned RMB 68 from the platforms today, but earned RMB 200 from my own customers (Interview, driver, 12 December 2019).

b. Working with restaurants to make fake orders

In the initial period of this industry, the digital supervision of drivers (for example, through online payment and real-time location tracking) was not strict because of the absence of intelligent systems. The main means of managing delivery drivers was through the number of finished orders, which dictated their income. Therefore, drivers found a quick way to earn more money without making much effort: they pretended to be customers to order food on the platforms from restaurants with which they had already established a cooperative relationship. After receiving orders from drivers, the restaurants did not have to cook or prepare any food, and the drivers did not have to pick up or deliver any orders. The only thing the drivers had to do was sit very close to the location of the restaurants (because the order distribution was based on the nearest location), and order food from their cooperating restaurant using different accounts on the platforms. In the early years of this industry, in the face of fierce competition, the platforms tended to subsidize the restaurants and give discounts to customers in order to expand the market. This means that drivers received relatively high rewards based on their “finished” orders, and the restaurants received the subsidies from the platforms at no extra cost. In the delivery drivers’ language, this method is called “making fake orders in collaboration with the restaurants”. One driver explained why drivers earned a lot of money in the initial stages of the industry:

It was very easy and fast to earn a lot of money in 2015. As long as you were smart and reacted quickly to market change, earning more than RMB 10,000 every month was easy when you were lying on your bed. I heard that many drivers “finished” more than 100 orders with restaurants every day and earned a lot of money at that time. I was not lucky and entered this industry late. Now the platforms supervise our online payment and the drivers’ locations at any time, so it is hard to play this trick again (Interview, driver, 16 November 2019).

It should be noted that nowadays this strategy is used less often by drivers because Meituan and Eleme platforms can supervise every step in the delivery process through their online payment and real-location tracking systems. But the strategy is still used, mainly when drivers aim to upgrade their rank. For instance, if another two finished orders are needed for a driver to maintain or upgrade his rank in the next week, he will make two orders from Meituan or Eleme, pay for them, pick up at the restaurant, and eat the food. He can defend himself by saying that: “We are delivery drivers, but we are also customers and need to eat” (group interview, 28 December 2019) if and when the fake order is found by the platform. Normally, these fake orders will not be detected if one driver makes fewer than 10 fake orders every month. Drivers will be fined RMB 20-500 according to the case; drivers’ accounts will be deleted by platforms and they cannot work until they have received face-to-face training. Making fake orders is explicitly banned in the drivers’ working regulations on their apps.

c. Working with customers and contractors to preemptively register the completion of

an order

Facing short delivery times, to avoid punishment because of late delivery, drivers will click “finished” or “cannot contact the customer” on their apps when they are about to be late for the orders. In the drivers’ language, this is called “preemptively registering the completion of an order” and “ostensible abnormal situation report”; this is clearly banned by the platforms. To evade supervision, the drivers will call their customers in advance, requesting them not to pick up phone calls from the platforms later. If the customers agree and cooperate with the driver, the driver will be successful; otherwise, if the driver is found out, he will be fined RMB 50. This tactic is commonly used by drivers. A food delivery driver working for Eleme justified its use in these terms:

If time is not enough, we will click “finish” at a very close distance from our customer. Of course, we have not yet delivered the food to our customer, but normally, platforms will not find this out. If they do find out, we can argue that there is no signal in the gated compound or office building’s elevator, so I had to click “finish” outside the building. Or I can say the customer asked me to change [and deliver] to another location when I contacted the customer in advance. If I do not have time to contact the customer in advance and the customer questions this, I can also say that oh, I clicked by mistake. I wanted to click another order in my app but clicked your order; hope you understand (Interview, driver, 14 October 2019).

For full-time drivers, the only risk is that their real-time locations are exactly shown on their station managers’ computers.⁷ However, most interviewees admit that actually their station managers know this tactic and sometimes even encourage drivers to do so. This is because one important criterion of the station’s working performance is “delivering on time” and delivering orders late also results in punishments for the station manager. In this sense, full-time drivers and their station managers are working together to trick the platforms and to circumvent the platform’s assessment process of the station. As a delivery driver said:

In our morning meetings, our station manager told us that as long as we call customers in advance and communicate well we can click “finish” on the app in advance. Of course, this is banned by the platforms, but I think station managers know this; they just do not want to admit it (Interview, driver, 31 January 2020).

This highlights the use by drivers of Scott’s “weapons of the weak” – dissimulation, deception, false compliance, and feigned ignorance. Each type of everyday resistance presented above can be read as an attempt by drivers to gain a measure of control over their own working circumstances and renegotiate the restrictions on their labor process with their employers. Facing strict algorithmic controls from apps, drivers know how to play the system in their everyday work and collude with other actors such as restaurant owners, customers, and station managers to cover up their action. As a driver said in a WeChat group, citing a well-known adage: “Policies come from above, counter-policies from below”. This is also a sign of the ability of workers to learn from the algorithm and “to play” with it for their benefit (Bignami et al, 2024). Different from collective actions, these minor coping strategies can be effective: drivers can upgrade their ranks and get more pay by slightly manipulating data, which is all the platforms focus on. Nevertheless, drivers clearly acknowledge that they can on

occasion play games with platforms. Most interviewees said that fake orders that are too frequent and too obvious and preemptively registering the completion of an order too often can be detected by platforms, and they will be severely punished. Also, drivers still have to rely on the biggest two platforms to upgrade their ranks and receive more good feedback, not least because customers tend to contact privately drivers who have accumulated a large amount of previous work and good reviews with Eleme and Meituan. This shows that experienced drivers get the hang of keeping a balance between the formal and informal and the legal and illegal in their everyday work. In other words, drivers' everyday resistance is only tolerated by platforms because it poses no significant threat to the platforms' interests.

Conclusion

Focusing on the livelihood strategies of Shanghai delivery drivers and through "working at small scale, collecting narratives, listening to workers" (McDowell, 2015, p. 19), this article has addressed two research gaps within the literature on labor geography and labor resistance: firstly the need to pay attention both to the "life stories and lived experiences of workers" and to "the consciousness and identity of workers, to their everyday embodied experiences" (McDowell, 2015, p. 18); and secondly to the need to reveal the nexus between different resistance practices (Lilja et al., 2017). Demonstrating how drivers resort to protest and deal with algorithmic controls in their everyday work, our research has shown that drivers are neither always disadvantaged group or victims, nor however can they successfully get away from commodification and exploitation in the labor market.

This research provides an in-depth analysis of how the platform economy is deployed in China's national and urban context. It contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the platform economy by highlighting the unique modalities and strategies of delivery drivers in China, which differ significantly from those in Western contexts, which are often addressed in the existing literature. This study explores the various impacts and responses that the platform economy generates, focusing in particular on the resistance strategies of Chinese platform workers. Our study sheds light on the specific forms of struggle against the asymmetric power of platforms and provides new insights into the mechanisms of resistance. We identify key strategies of Chinese platform workers and thus contribute to the broader discourse on labor rights and platform governance. The theoretical and empirical implications of the findings are now discussed.

Firstly, on the relationship between open, collective actions and everyday forms of resistance, the case of Shanghai delivery drivers shows that the drivers' resistance does not follow Scott's linear development dynamics; rather, it is closer to Lilja et al.'s argument that "resistance inspires, provokes, generates, encourages or eventually discourages resistance" (2017, p. 52). Based on Lilja et al.'s argument, this research further proposes that effective resistance could inspire similar resistance. The successful strike in Beijing encouraged a similar protest in Shanghai; Shanghai delivery drivers' effective everyday forms of resistance further generate common knowledge among drivers allowing them to game with their working platforms. This means that

the outcomes of the “last round of contention (and events elsewhere)” are important (O’Brien, 2013, p. 1057). However, in the Chinese context, it is hard to conclude that everyday forms of resistance can lay the foundation for open and undisguised confrontations. Two factors help account for this: “the socio-economic and cultural contexts in which workers are embedded” and “the class power of workers” (Anwar & Graham, 2020a, p. 1286). Since the mid 2010s under Xi Jinping’s rule, the Chinese government has become more aggressive in dealing with protest activities and has implemented increased surveillance on those who engage in collective actions (Chen, 2020). Also, the delivery drivers’ individual and geographically dispersed work is different from that of factory workers and vendors, who have common work spaces. Existing literature on resistance from factory workers and vendors shows that their common public space can breed organization, communication, and networking among actors (Bayat, 1997b; Ngai & Smith, 2007). The lack of common work places among delivery drivers helps to explain the rarity of organized resistance from these platform workers.

Secondly, there is no clear dichotomy between open defiance and everyday forms of resistance as Scott supposed; rather, the actions of the Shanghai delivery drivers show that public confrontations can also be quiet, disguised, anonymous, indirect; and everyday forms of resistance are not necessarily that invisible. The two protests undertaken by Shansong drivers in 2019 were not dramatic, loud, and disorderly; rather, they took the form of quiet discussions with the Shansong platform. Although protestors were not satisfied with the efforts of their six representatives and the final replies from the Shansong platform, they did not express their dissatisfaction openly and directly. Their QQ and WeChat groups became their main communication channel because of the anonymity provided by these social media outlets. Drivers’ everyday forms of resistance are broader than individual actions. Making fake orders during the initial stage of the online food-ordering industry needs the cooperation of restaurant owners; preemptively registering the completion of an order requires the consent of customers and is a practice frequently acknowledged by station managers. This is in line with Sun and Chen (2021)’s findings on Beijing food delivery drivers utilizing social relations and community support in exercising their agency. However, drivers’ social relations tend to be relatively short-term and unstable because of high mobility in the food delivery industry. Therefore, it is hard to define which form of resistance the drivers are involved in if one uses a binary perception of everyday resistance and organized social movements. The complexity of the delivery drivers’ resistance should be recognized because resistance is “heterogeneous and contingent due to changing contexts and situations (not a universal strategy or coherent form of action)” (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016, p. 418). In this sense, this research contradicts the dichotomy suggested by Scott and thoroughly explores “a whole world of small-scale resistance that we need to recognise” (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018, p. 225). As Vinthagen and Johansson argue, a more powerful searchlight should be shone on the “less obvious kinds of resistance that are – for the moment and in certain situations – neither expressed in dramatic, confrontational and public events, nor with (collectively elected) leadership, or (explicit) political motivations or sustained by formal (underground)

organizations” (2013, p. 9).

Thirdly, platform workers’ resistance is not a political act; rather, they are driven by the “necessity to survive and improve a dignified life” (Bayat, 1997b p. 58). For most delivery drivers, their main motivation for joining in protest action, making fake orders, or preemptively registering the completion of an order in their everyday work is to have more orders and earn more money and not to openly resist exploitation at the algorithmic hands of the platforms. This is also echoed by Barratt’s (2020) research on Australian food delivery workers, whose resistance is low-level because they aim to improve individual conditions rather than challenge platforms’ business models. These expressions of resistance on the part of delivery drivers are similar to Bayat’s argument on “floating social clusters—migrants, refugees, unemployed, squatters, street vendors and other marginalised groups” in the Middle East, who “strive in a life-long process to improve their lot... In this process... this non-movement is neither able to cause broader political transformation, nor does it aim for it” (Bayat, 2000, p. 553). Without “clear leadership, ideology and structured organization” (Bayat, 1997b, p. 57), drivers participating in protest action are not intent on challenging political authority or power structures. This survival motivation also explains the cautious position adopted by drivers over participating in strikes – they fear losing their job and income with their accounts deleted. Motivated by their survival instinct and desire to pursue a better life in Shanghai, the drivers’ resistance is not “carried out as conscious political acts” (Lilja, 2017, p. 44).

It should be noted that the context of the pandemic has impacted on both platform companies and platform workers in China. Compared to the platform firms who are generating profits, the low-skilled platform labor faces rising informalization, technology control, lower quality jobs, and less autonomy and unionization rights (Sasikumar and Sersia, 2020). During the COVID-19 crisis, more low-income and unemployed workers were attracted by flexible gig work, and as more workers joined the digital platform, the platforms could exploit the advantage of having an oversupply of labor and obtain financial advantages in their partnership with the workers. In conditions of fierce competition and anxiety over job retention, food delivery drivers in Shanghai rely more on everyday resistance rather than collective actions. This is different from platform workers in European countries, who have organized collective and public protests during the Covid pandemic (Dif-Pradalier et al, 2024). The Chinese government has recently begun to introduce policies aimed at improving the social security and working conditions of platform workers. These measures, if effectively implemented, could significantly enhance the stability and quality of life for delivery drivers, potentially reducing the need for everyday forms of resistance and fostering a more sustainable and equitable platform economy.

Notes

1. Data source: from China Labour Bulletin Strike Map: https://maps.clb.org.hk/?i18n_language=en_US&map=1&startDate=2011-01&endDate=2023-11&eventId=&keyword=delivery%20drivers&addressId=&parentAddressId=&address=&par

- [entAddress=&industry=10307,10308&parentIndustry=&industryName=Courier,Food%20delivery](#). The China Labour Bulletin has identified food delivery workers and couriers as among the most precarious groups in the Internet-related economy. Wage arrears and arbitrary pay cuts are the main reasons for their collective actions. Accessed on: 29 November 2023
2. Data source: from Technode news report: <https://technode.com/2019/12/17/chinas-food-delivery-growth-slows-to-four-year-low-report/> *China's food delivery growth slows to four-year low: report* Accessed on: 29 November 2023
3. See: https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_12137870 加强反垄断监管，促平台经济规范发展 [Strengthen anti-monopoly supervision and promote the standardized development of the platform economy] Accessed on: 21 September 2022
4. The secondary data include government policy documents affecting delivery drivers' housing conditions, medical care, career choices, social insurance, and even their *hukou* (residence permits). For instance, in January 2021, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security clarified that delivery drivers should have access to vocational training and can be awarded status as role models if they make great contributions to the city, but they cannot be included in the current working injury insurance system provided by the government. See: http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/xxgk2020/fdzdgknr/zhgl/jytabl/tadf/202101/t20210113_407557.html 人力资源社会保障部对政协十三届全国委员会第三次会议第 3391 号（社会管理类 287 号）提案的答复 [Reply of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security to the Proposal No. 3391 (No. 287 of Social Management) of the Third Session of the Thirteenth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference] Accessed on: 19 September 2022
5. Here, algorithmic control means soft control via techniques such as assignment algorithms, surge price algorithms, ratings, and ranking systems (Rahman, 2016; Griesbach et al., 2019).
6. In the Eleme and Meituan platforms, all drivers are assessed and graded into six ranks according to their work performance. They are re-assessed each week.
7. Freelance drivers are not managed by station managers and can deliver any order in Shanghai. Full-time drivers are managed by station managers and can only deliver orders within a fixed area.

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