Resistance under the Radar: Organization of Work and Collective Action in China's Food Delivery Industry

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ABSTRACT

As services have come to account for an ever growing portion of employment in China, platform-based delivery work has grown exponentially, incorporating millions of workers. Based on a study of food-delivery company Ele.me, we first provide a detailed account of the structure of the platform-based food delivery industry, as well as worker grievances and resistance. While Ele.me workers are subjected to algorithmic control and intensive evaluation, the subcontracting structure of employment presents workers with new forms of leverage. Workers engage in quiet, small-scale, and WeChat-mediated strikes that target the subcontractors who are their direct employers, a phenomenon distinct from the occasional acts of collective resistance among food couriers in other countries. While these strikes have limitations in advancing worker interests, we show how labor unrest has emerged among such workers despite an increasingly constrained political environment and a high degree of online censorship.

Scholars of Chinese labor have become increasingly pessimistic in recent years about workers' capacity to mobilize.[1] Following the resumption of China's economic growth after the 2008 economic crisis, workers appeared to be on the march, as they leveled aggressive demands and notched up a series of victories in recurrent wildcat strikes centered in Guangdong's booming manufacturing sector.[2] But in the latter half of the 2010s, a number of factors began to undermine these advances. China's economy began to slow significantly, and stepped

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1. Sarosh Kuruvilla, "Editorial Essay: From Cautious Optimism to Renewed Pessimism: Labor Voice and Labor Scholarship in China," *ILR Review* 71, no. 5 (2018): 1013–28.

2. See, e.g., Florian Butollo and Tobias ten Brink, "Challenging the Atomization of Discontent: Patterns of Migrant-Worker Protest in China during the Series of Strikes in 2010," *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012): 419–40.

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up repression coupled with major structural changes in the economy delivered significant blows to the incipient labor movement of a decade prior.[3] Amidst a broader crackdown on civil society, the labor movement suffered setbacks that included the jailing of numerous prominent activists[4] and the curtailing of space for even the state-run unions to engage in reforms.

Nonetheless, worker resistance has by no means disappeared. In looking for emergent forms of worker resistance, we have examined a rapidly expanding industry: platform-based food delivery. The market for online food delivery has increased from a turnover of 21 billion RMB in 2011 to 243 billion RMB in 2018.[5] In 2019, 96.6 percent of the market was captured by two companies, Ele.me and Meituan. The former had 3 million registered couriers in 2020, while the latter had over 5 million.[6] This rapid growth has been built at least in part upon exploitative working conditions, and scattered reports indicate that food-delivery workers have engaged in overt resistance—there were more than 100 documented strikes and protests over the course of 2018–19.[7]

With some important exceptions, most of the scholarship around the world on this type of company has focused on how digital platform technology serves to enhance control[8] and limit worker resistance.[9] The few documented instances in which such workers have organized collective action outside of China have depended on relatively secure digital communication among them not subject to surveillance by the state or by companies, as well as support from independent labor organizations[10]—conditions that do not exist in China. So how do food-delivery workers in China organize collectively? How does the organization of platform-based work shape labor conflict? And what does this tell us about the

3. Tim Pringle, "Reflections on Labor in China: From a Moment to a Movement," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 1 (2013): 191–202.

4. Ivan Franceschini and Elisa Nesossi, "State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs: A Chilling Effect?," *China Journal*, no. 80 (2018): 111–29.

5. iiMedia Research, "2018H1 China Online Take-out Market Monitoring Report," 2018, https://report.iimedia.cn/repo17-0/30236.html.

6. Meituan announced 3.99 million registered couriers in 2019. Amid the big increase in online food delivery related to the coronavirus pandemic, the number of registered couriers increased by 1.07 million in the first four months of 2020. "Meituan: wugeyue xinzeng qishou 107 wan, zhan 2019 nian pingtai zong qishou shu 1/4" [Meituan: 1.07 million new couriers registered accounting for a quarter of the platform's total couriers in 2019], *Xinlang Keji* [Sina Tech], June 11, 2020, https://tech.sina.com.cn/roll/2020-06-11/doc-iirczymk6388441.shtml.

7. "China Labor Bulletin's Strike Map," *China Labor Bulletin*, accessed July 24, 2020, https://maps.clb.org.hk/?i18n_language=en_US&map=1&startDate=2018-01&endDate=2020-01&eventId=&keyword=&address=&industry=10308&parentIndustry=&industryName=Food%20delivery.

8. See, e.g., Alessandro Gandini, "Labour Process Theory and the Gig Economy," *Human Relations* 72, no. 6 (2019): 1039–56.

9. See, e.g., Alex Veen, Tom Barratt, and Caleb Goods, "Platform-Capital's 'App-Etite'for Control: A Labour Process Analysis of Food-Delivery Work in Australia," *Work, Employment and Society* 34, no. 3 (2020): 388–406.

10. Callum Cant, *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

evolution of labor protest as the Chinese economy's center of gravity has shifted away from manufacturing and toward technology, services, and logistics?[11]

This article begins with a detailed account of the organization of work for Ele.me's couriers in China. An understanding of the structure of the industry, in particular Ele.me's model of labor subcontracting, is critical not just for identifying how workers are exploited and controlled but also for identifying sources of workers' leverage and resistance derived from the organization of production. This involves making an important distinction between "crowdsourced" workers (众包骑手) who register for work directly through an app and those who, alternatively, are employed by small-scale subcontractors (专送骑手). We will see that worker resistance in each of these two groups is motivated by an array of grievances, primarily although not exclusively related to piece rates. Critically, we show how the platform's "evaluative chains" subject not only workers but also the subcontracted delivery stations that directly manage them to constant digital surveillance, assessment, and control. With stations under intense pressure to maintain just-in-time logistic capabilities, workers are endowed with a new form of workplace bargaining power. This has allowed them to engage in hidden forms of labor contention that have, almost by definition, escaped the public eye. In addition to the noisier public protests that have been captured by the media, food couriers also organize online to conduct small-scale collective actions in which a group of workers simultaneously log out from taking delivery orders. It will be observed that the entire process of striking—from grievance articulation, to organizing, and then negotiating with management—can be carried out largely or exclusively online. While these strikes are generally short-lived, defensive in nature, and by no means always successful, they are indicative of one of the ways that labor unrest has evolved alongside shifting political, economic, and technological conditions. In concluding, we will identify continuities and divergences with earlier forms of labor protest and reassess current understandings of social resistance and online censorship.

WORKER RESISTANCE AND PLATFORM-BASED WORK

Scholarly research on labor issues in the platform economy has grown quickly over the past few years in step with the expansion of this new economy. Most research internationally has focused on issues of legal ambiguity and informalization of labor, as well as algorithmic control. With respect to this article's core concern, a recurrent theme in the research on platform-based workers globally

11. Manufacturing's value added as a share of GDP fell from 32.5 percent in 2006 to 27.2 percent in 2019. See https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.IND.MANF.ZS?locations=CN, accessed January 19, 2021. According to China Labour Bulletin's strike data, manufacturing workers' share of total strikes and protests fell from 18 percent in 2015 to 9 percent in 2020.

has been how new technology has served to enhance control over workers.[12] Alessandro Gandini has argued that constant evaluation by the platform constitutes a form of "techno-normative" control over them,[13] a sentiment echoed by Miriam Cherry in her discussion of Taylorism and "automatic management."[14] These conditions pertain not just to food-delivery work, but more broadly in the platform economy.

Nonetheless, numerous studies in Western countries have identified how platform-based food couriers' collective resistance is constrained, but not impossible. Alex Veen et al.'s research on food-delivery workers in Australia found little in the way of overt resistance,[15] though elsewhere more confrontational forms of collective action have emerged, as carefully documented in Callum Cant's account of the strikes against Deliveroo in the United Kingdom.[16] For Cant as well as Joyce et al. and Kurt Vandaele, traditional unions as well as quasi-union groups played an important role in organizing platform workers.[17] Tassinari and Maccarrone have referred to "free spaces" as forums, either digital or face to face, that allow for relatively unconstrained discussion, grievance articulation, and mobilization.[18] In short, despite the individualizing and control-oriented aspects of platform-based work, it is clear that some forms of resistance are possible.

Hui Yu finds various local jurisdictions in China have reached different conclusions as to whether couriers should be considered employees of the platform. Currently, most food-delivery workers are subjected to the same type of managerial

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12. Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark, "Algorithmic Labor and Information Asymmetries: A Case Study of Uber's Drivers," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (July 2016). They note that "some collective agency existed, including the sharing of resources and information as well as assisting others in case of accident or breakdown" (27).

13. Alessandro Gandini, "Labour Process Theory and the Gig Economy," *Human Relations* 72, no. 6 (June 2019): 1049.

14. Miriam A. Cherry "Beyond Misclassification: The Digital Transformation of Work," *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal* 37, no. 3 (2015–2016): 577–602.

15. Alex Veen, Tom Barratt, and Caleb Goods, "Platform-Capital's 'App-Etite' for Control: A Labour Process Analysis of Food-Delivery Work in Australia," *Work, Employment and Society* 34, no. 3 (2020): 399.

16. Callum Cant, *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy* (Cambridge, Polity, 2020).

17. Simon Joyce, Denis Neumann, Vera Trappmann, and Charles Umney, "A Global Struggle: Worker Protest in the Platform Economy," European Trade Union Institute, accessed February 26, 2021, https://www.etui.org/publications/policy-briefs/european-economic-employment-and-social-policy/a-global-struggle-worker-protest-in-the-platform-economy; Kurt Vandaele, "Will Trade Unions Survive in the Platform Economy? Emerging Patterns of Platform Workers' Collective Voice and Representation in Europe," European Trade Union Institute, accessed August 27, 2020, https://www.etui.org/publications/working-papers/will-trade-unions-survive-in-the-platform-economy-emerging-patterns-of-platform-workers-collective-voice-and-representation-in-europe.

18. Arianna Tassinari and Vincenzo Maccarrone, "Riders on the Storm: Workplace Solidarity among Gig Economy Couriers in Italy and the UK," *Work, Employment and Society* 34, no. 1 (February 2020): 35–54; see also Mohammad Amir Anwar and Mark Graham, "Hidden Transcripts of the Gig Economy: Labour Agency and the New Art of Resistance among African Gig Workers," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 52, no. 7 (October 2020): 1272.

control as full-time employees without enjoying the attendant benefits in terms of labor law protections.[19] Shanyun Xiao argues that ambiguity in couriers' legal standing as employees derives from the fact that they often sign a user agreement on the platform app that specifies that they do not have any form of employment relationship.[20] In a review of court cases, Mei Yang shows that a station-based courier's contract (when there is any) with the subcontracted company exempts the platform from legal responsibility.[21] As in the United States and Europe,[22] the emergence of platform technology in China has intensified the previously existing trend of informalization and outsourcing of labor—a trend that has persisted despite a series of new labor laws in the 2000s.[23]

But it is also apparent that platform-based workers in China have developed their own counterstrategies. Wu Qingjun et al. identify multiple tactics employed by Uber to control its drivers in China, but they find that the effectiveness of these management strategies is significantly impacted by the degree of drivers' reliance on the platform as a source of income.[24] Similarly, Ping Sun studies the effect of algorithms on food-delivery couriers, arguing that couriers' reliance on the platform algorithm to mediate delivery time deprives couriers of control over their work schedule. However, digital control is not total, as Sun also finds evidence of couriers creating strategies to circumvent the algorithm.[25]

The most obvious difference with democratic countries is that the government does not allow the kinds of independent organizations that play a critical role in mobilizations elsewhere. China's official trade union federation, the All China Federation of Trade Unions, is formally controlled by the Communist Party, and it has evinced little interest or capacity to mobilize workers in any sector.[26]

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19. Hui Yu, "The Destiny of Web Platform Workers in China: Employees, Nothing or a 'Third Option,'" *Japan Labor Issues* 2, no. 8 (2018): 92–100.

20. Shanyun Xiao, "Understanding the Employment Status of Gig-Workers in China's Sharing Economy Era: An Empirical Legal Study," paper presented at the fifteenth Asian Law and Economics Association (AsLEA) Conference, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, June 27–28, 2019.

21. Mei Yang, "'Internet + Food' Defining New Labor Relations—from the Perspective of the 'Food Delivery' Industry," *Economic Research Guide*, no 16. (2020), series no. 438 ("互联网+ 餐饮"新型劳动关系从属性认定——以"外卖行业"为视角分析).

22. Antonio Aloisi, "Commoditized Workers: Case Study Research on Labor Law Issues Arising from a Set of On-Demand/Gig Economy Platforms," *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal* 37 (2015): 653.

23. Sarosh Kuruvilla, Ching Kwan Lee, and Mary E. Gallagher, eds., *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization: Markets, Workers, and the State in a Changing China*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

24. Qingjun Wu, Hao Zhang, Zhen Li, and Kai Liu, "Labor Control in the Gig Economy: Evidence from Uber in China," *Journal of Industrial Relations* 61, no. 4 (2019): 574–96.

25. Ping Sun, "Your Order, Their Labor: An Exploration of Algorithms and Laboring on Food Delivery Platforms in China," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (2019): 308–23.

26. Feng Chen, "Union Power in China: Source, Operation, and Constraints," *Modern China* 35 (2009): 662–89. The ACFTU has listed food-delivery workers as a priority, but there is little evidence that this has produced material gains. And this has no relevance for understanding worker strikes, as the union is without exception opposed to work stoppages.

The few independent labor NGOs that exist have long been reluctant to organize overt forms of resistance, and in any event they have been badly hamstrung by repression since 2015.[27] The other resource that delivery workers in liberal democracies can draw on is the "free space" of digital communication, which also does not exist in China. The scholarly consensus for several years has been that China's digital censorship regime is directed first and foremost at foreclosing possibilities for collective action.[28]

Ele.me's specific organization of production, oriented toward ensuring maximum efficiency and reliability in food delivery, is key to understanding the form of resistance employed by couriers.[29] As we detail below, the platform's decision to subcontract much of its labor recruitment and distribution has both brought workers into conflict with their immediate managers, and given them a novel form of leverage. Grievances are targeted at the subcontractors, as they are responsible for order distribution and setting piece rates and bonuses. Worker leverage derives from evaluative chains in which the platform subjects subcontractors as well as workers to an intense regime of quantified assessment. The platform can punish subcontractors for relatively minor disruptions to the tightly coordinated logistical system—a situation that endows workers with a degree of *workplace bargaining power*. The latter term has been theorized by Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver as referring to power that workers maintain over capital by dint of their position within the organization of production.[30] While workers gain leverage over their managers (if not necessarily the platform) via this arrangement, it simultaneously fractures and constrains the scale of resistance, as subcontracted delivery stations are small and spatially circumscribed.

As much of the research on platform-based labor issues has focused on the more general category of worker "agency," it is worth clarifying that our research is specifically concerned with *strikes*. We adopt a widely used definition of strikes as "a temporary stoppage of work by a group of employees in order to express a grievance or enforce a demand."[31] Ele.me workers do not have their own union or collective bargaining agreements, and their collective actions do

27. Ivan Franceschini and Elisa Nesossi, "State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs: A Chilling Effect?," *China Journal*, no. 80 (July 2018): 111–29.

28. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43; Guobin Yang, "(Un)civil Society in Digital China| Demobilizing the Emotions of Online Activism in China: A Civilizing Process," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 21.

29. We concur with Tassinari and Maccarrone's assessment that "the bases of worker solidarity lie in the structural contradictions originating from the labour process" ("Riders on the Storm," 40).

30. Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly J Silver, "Labor Movements and Capital Migration: The United States and Western Europe in World-Historical Perspective," in *Labor in the Capitalist World-Economy*, ed. C. Bergquist (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1984), 183–216.

31. Richard Hyman, *Strikes* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 17. The term "employee" should be interpreted loosely, as couriers may not be considered employees in a strict legal sense.

not have legal standing. Nonetheless, the form of resistance we document is qualitatively different from the foot dragging James Scott describes as "everyday forms of resistance,"[32] or even the individualized sabotage and absenteeism associated with "refusal of work."[33] These delivery workers' form of resistance is a collective, instrumentally coordinated activity directed toward advancing their interests, usually related to wage issues,[34] by withdrawing their labor to pressure management to accede to their demands. Despite the small scale, this clearly fits the definition of a strike.

METHODOLOGY

Our research focuses on worker contention at Ele.me, the Alibaba-owned company that controls 44 percent of the food-delivery market in China.[35] There are some differences between Ele.me and its only significant competitor, Meituan, even though their employment and delivery models are similar. In particular, Ele.me's managers of subcontracted delivery stations play a larger role in distributing orders to their couriers than is the case with Meituan.[36]

This article is based on fieldwork conducted from September 2019 to January 2020, with additional online interviews conducted through July 2020. The first author conducted 61 semistructured in-person and online interviews with informants (33 with Beijing couriers, 22 in the Yangtze Delta, and 6 from other parts of the country). Informants were approached at sites where they pick up meals to deliver from food courts and shopping centers in Beijing and Nanjing. Following in-person interviews, some of the informants introduced the authors to locality-based and nationwide WeChat courier groups where additional informants were recruited. Eighteen interviewees worked as crowdsourced couriers (individuals who directly register as couriers on the delivery platform), and 18 as station-based couriers (who are employed and managed by subcontracting companies); 25 have experience in both modes of employment. All except for

32. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

33. Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal," *Semiotext (E)* 3, no. 3 (1980): 28–34. On sabotage, see https://libcom.org/library/capitalist-domination-working-class-sabotage-negri, accessed October 21, 2020.

34. Simon Joyce et al. have found that wage issues are the most important source of conflict for platform workers in other national contexts as well. See Simon Joyce, Denis Neumann, Vera Trappmann, and Charles Umney, "A Global Struggle: Worker Protest in the Platform Economy," European Trade Union Institute, accessed August 27, 2020, https://www.etui.org/publications/policy-briefs/european-economic-employment-and-social-policy/a-global-struggle-worker-protest-in-the-platform-economy.

35. "2019Q3 hulianwang canyin waimai hangye shuzihua jincheng fenxi" [2019Q3 Internet food-delivery industry digitalization progress analysis], *Yiguan* [Analysis], September 26, 2019, http://www.100ec.cn/detail–6528610.html.

36. Ele.me and Meituan share the same employment structure with crowdsourced and station-based couriers. However, Ele.me's station managers often directly intervene in order dispatchment, whereas station-based couriers in Meituan almost always receive their orders straight from the platform system.

one interviewee were active full-time couriers. The only exception was a Beijing station manager, who had been promoted from being a courier. Among the interviewees, 39 informants had direct or indirect experience with strikes. Three informants shared more detailed accounts of their own recent strike experiences through screenshots of WeChat records. Interviews lasted 15–120 minutes. Additionally, we have closely observed five courier online chat groups on WeChat, including one nationwide group, three local groups (two based in Beijing and one in Nanjing), and one Beijing station group.

The information on workplace organization is largely drawn from Beijing, where the first author conducted fieldwork. We cast a wider net in collecting strike information, drawing on cases not only in Beijing, but also Nanjing, Shanghai, Dongguan, and Shenzhen. There is little variation in terms of the basic organization of employment across regions, as the platform maintains a consistent approach nationally (even if there are some marginal differences in terms of wage levels, legal protections, etc.). While we cannot claim national uniformity in the dynamics of resistance, assessing a geographically diverse set of strike actions reveals that the form of resistance we have identified exists beyond Beijing. We are not able to draw conclusions about the frequency of strikes, and our central argument will center on the nature of the collective actions.

Our open-ended interviews presented us with an opportunity for couriers to report their grievances as well as their perceptions and experiences with collective resistance. Additionally, online chat groups enabled us to observe couriers' daily interactions with each other and their discussions of work routines, reactions toward platform policies and station management, and even the development of resistance.

ORGANIZATION OF EMPLOYMENT

China's food-delivery industry is dominated by two types of employment—crowdsourcing and subcontracted delivery stations. Platforms like Ele.me use both types. They use station-based couriers to guarantee delivery capacity for restaurants willing to pay a premium, and use crowdsourced couriers for smaller restaurants that cannot afford the premium and as a backup. Crowdsourced couriers working for Ele.me wear the platform's blue uniform, but they experience less security alongside more flexibility. A crowdsourced courier can easily register an account with Ele.me and start delivering orders immediately. While there is no formal work hour requirement, an overwhelming majority of them are de facto full-time workers who work for at least eight hours a day as food couriers.[37]

37. Leping Huang, "Wangyue peisongyuan, laodong baohusan ruhe chengqilai?" [Online food couriers, how to protect their labor?], http://www.yilianlabor.cn/yanjiu/2021/1902.html.

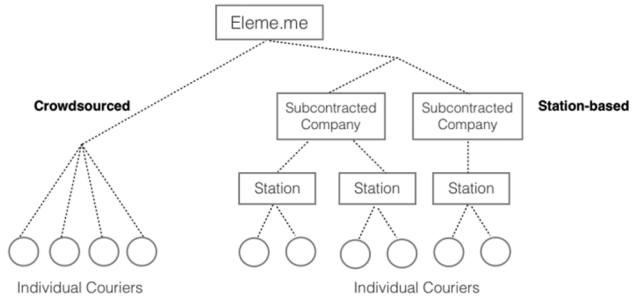


Figure 1. Schema of crowdsourced and station-based labor

According to an Ele.me report released in 2018, 40–60 percent of its couriers received 4,000–6,000 yuan per month, almost 30 percent received 6,000–8,000 yuan, and 10 percent received more than 8,000 yuan. An average courier delivers 48 orders per day and travels 150 kilometers.[38] An updated Ele.me report released in 2020 provided demographic information about its couriers. The average courier is around 31 years old, while 91 percent are male and 80 percent have a rural background.[39] Couriers usually use e-bikes to deliver orders, and it is very common for them to own their own vehicles, as the platform and subcontracting companies provide little to no assistance.

Crowdsourced Meal Couriers

Crowdsourced workers are the norm for most platform-based employment around the world. In this model, platforms "source" their labor directly from a "crowd" of individuals who have registered in the system (see fig. 1 for a schematized depiction). In the case of food delivery, tasks are algorithmically distributed to individual couriers logged into the system based on an opaque set of conditions. Crowdsourced workers in China do not have formalized legal employment regardless of how many hours they work, and the platform is quite explicit about this in the user agreement.[40] Thus, the labor force is highly flexible, and workers do not enjoy a labor contract, a guaranteed wage, or social insurance benefits. Since crowdsourced couriers are individual contractors who are less reliable in terms of service quality and work hours, it is generally cheaper for restaurants to use crowdsourced delivery. In addition to serving smaller restaurants that cannot afford station-based

38. "2018 waimai qishou qunti dongcha baogao" [2018 food courier insight report], Sohu, December 29, 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/285591384_170557.

39. "2020 eleme lanqishi diaoyan baogao" [2020 Eleme.me blue courier investigation report], Sohu, April 22, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/390207782_384789.

40. "Fengniao paotui yonghu xieyi" [Fengniao courier user agreement], *Ele.me*, accessed August 27, 2020, https://h5.ele.me/service/agreement/.

delivery, they handle longer-distance orders and occasional orders that are rejected by station-based couriers.

Crowdsourced couriers are not restricted by a fixed work schedule. Unlike station-based couriers, they can log in or out of the system at any time. Nonetheless, many interviewees report comparable work hours to station-based couriers—often as long as 10 hours a day and seven days a week. This is partially due to the fact that the crowdsourced delivery fee fluctuates constantly, ranging anywhere from 2 to 60 yuan per order. Hence, stretching work time to get more orders is the couriers' best strategy to guarantee a stable income and win platform bonuses.[41] Without a human manager, crowdsourced couriers are fully governed by the algorithm, which dispatches orders, determines piece rates, and distributes bonuses based on a courier's statistical performance measured by their order completion and customer feedback. In short, crowdsourced couriers' organization of work more closely resembles platform-based workers in other countries in that they are directly under the management of the platform.

Subcontracted Station-Based Employment

The system of subcontracting to stations the employment and the management of couriers is essential to Ele.me's approach to providing efficient and reliable delivery. The stations employ between a dozen to over a hundred couriers, and each station can be understood as an organized team of couriers employed by one subcontracting company. A single company may operate multiple stations within a city or region (see fig. 1). While the station has a physical office for administrative staff, the couriers do not use it and receive their delivery orders on the street through electronic messages. The platform geographically divides each city into different business circles (商圈) and designates roughly four to seven stations to each circle. When registering with Ele.me, restaurants choose whether to have deliveries made by station-based or crowdsourced couriers, and since station-based delivery is more reliable it is more commonly chosen by larger chain restaurants despite its greater expense. Each business circle in Beijing has roughly 300 restaurants contracted for station-based delivery within a roughly five-kilometer radius. The platform algorithm assigns orders to couriers based on their location. If a courier does not wish to deliver an order, he or she needs to have it approved by the station manager, who will then re-dispatch the order. Station-based couriers

41. The platform also encourages prolonged work time with its ranking system. While couriers have some agency to boost their pay by earning a higher ranking in the system, which requires more completed orders and good consumer feedback, pay is also determined by a range of factors outside the couriers' control, such as delivery distance, time of day, weather, price of the food, and how many other couriers are online. An individual may be able to increase their piece rate by working longer hours or using their knowledge to pick more profitable orders and delivery zones, but not the entire workforce.

are more constricted in terms of their work routine and pay than crowdsourced couriers, but are guaranteed a somewhat more stable income.

Since station-based delivery is meant to guarantee reliability, couriers have little work flexibility. They need to work for a minimum number of hours per day within a set timeframe to qualify for an attendance award (全勤奖). Securing this award can have a major impact on piece rates.[42] A typical station requires couriers to be online for at least eight hours between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. The station manager might further require couriers to attend morning meetings and stay online during peak hours. As couriers are only responsible for orders within their assigned business circle, they know the restaurants and their territory and can usually make 30–40 deliveries per day. As one courier explained, "Knowing the restaurants and how long they take to prepare food is a necessary skill for couriers." Late orders and negative customer feedback could result in personal penalties and may negatively affect the station.

Whether stations provide a base wage varies from station to station. While some couriers receive a daily or monthly base wage, many station-based couriers in our research reported that this is either nonexistent or linked with attendance and performance. At the time of recruitment some stations may promise a base wage of up to 4,000 yuan per month, but veteran couriers scoff at the offer. As one employee told us, "You cannot receive the base wage unless you complete enough orders, so the so-called base wage is just the money that you deserve. In reality, there is no base wage." Since station-based couriers often do not sign a formal contract with their subcontracted company, couriers struggle to legally support themselves when there is a conflict over the terms of employment. They get paid on a monthly basis and enjoy few benefits. The only welfare that is universally mandated by the platform is traffic injury insurance, to which employees must also contribute three yuan per day.

Although Ele.me's algorithm is critically important in structuring the experience of work, subcontracting of employment means that workers' relationship with the company is highly mediated by their station's management. The stations themselves are evaluated by the company based on several key metrics, including number of orders completed, customer feedback, and courier attendance rate. One courier explained, "If the station has good statistics, the platform will award the subcontractor and the station manager. If the statistics are bad, stations lose money." To ensure better statistics, the station manager is incentivized to push couriers to take more orders and to ensure the workers have a good service attitude. Couriers sometimes complain about the pressure they are under: "Station managers only care about managing their own statistics and interests, instead of our wellbeing." The app facilitates management by displaying couriers' daily performance. Every

42. One Beijing worker noted, "If we work 26 days we get 8.5 *kuai* per order, 28 days we get 9 *kuai* per order, and if it is fewer than 26 days 8 *kuai* per order."

courier can see how many orders their colleagues from the same station have completed for the day, and they are ranked based on the number of completed orders and the number of positive customer feedbacks.

WORKER GRIEVANCES

Unsurprisingly, wage concerns are paramount among grievances. Although lack of orders, fines, and inconveniences associated with restaurants, traffic, and accessing customers' homes contribute to their inability to increase wages, ultimately workers end up focusing on the piece rate in their conflicts with management.

Insufficient Orders

Even though most full-time couriers work for over 10 hours a day, they often wish they had more orders. Aside from lunch and dinner peak hours, it is common for couriers to be idled for extended periods during the day as they wait to receive an order. They tend to gather around shopping centers, food courts, or familiar restaurants as they do not have access to the station office. A shortage of orders means a smaller bonus.

Although stations are expected to guarantee a stable flow of orders, there are still great inequalities between couriers from different stations. Since the platform's evaluation is mostly related to the number of completed orders, the system favors bigger stations with more employees. A station manager in Beijing noted, "There are four to seven stations in one business circle. . . . Stations need to share restaurants in a business circle, so the competition for orders is determined by how many couriers a station has." More couriers can compete for more orders, which translates into better evaluation scores for the station, which means the platform dispatches even more orders to the station. However, this does not mean that all couriers who work for bigger stations necessarily benefit owing to intra-station inequality. Station managers assign better orders to favored couriers. A Nanjing courier who left station-based employment for crowdsourcing said, "I once experienced a dispatch assistant who took bribes from couriers. If you pay him 200 yuan a month, he would give you easy-to-deliver orders."

Low Piece Rates

As noted, the grievance that generated the most complaints is the low piece rate. This was especially the case for veteran couriers who had experienced the mid-2010s "golden age" of higher compensation, when platforms were doling out generous bonuses to attract workers and expand their market share. For crowdsourced couriers the piece rates are set by Ele.me's algorithm. For station-based couriers piece rates are set by the subcontracting companies, and stations can increase their

own profits by lowering piece rates. Although subcontractors normally would not push piece rates too much below the average for the region, their employees are in a disadvantageous situation because they cannot leave to join another station without having their final monthly wage withheld or reduced by their employer. Stations can also enforce higher attendance requirements and link piece rates with attendance. They can also directly lower piece rates without consulting with Ele.me. Couriers are often frustrated not only with the low rates, but also with managerial arbitrariness: "If you do not complete 1,000 orders in a month, the piece rate drops from 6.5 yuan to 6 yuan." Another courier in Beijing complained, "If you miss one day of work, the piece rate is reduced by 0.5 yuan. Just think about how much difference that makes for a day!" As long as the station eventually settles on a piece rate and pays couriers accordingly, Eleme.me does not intervene. In one courier's opinion, "The platform's rules are nonexistent in stations. The subcontractor sets the rule."

Fines, Deductions, and Safety Issues

Couriers frequently face fines and deductions, which primarily come in two forms. The first is associated with traffic rule violations. Due to the demanding delivery time, couriers are frequently forced to ignore traffic rules during peak hours. A nationwide courier WeChat group created its own traffic guide advising its members how to bypass regular traffic to save delivery time. It recommends stopping at red lights if the courier only has one or two orders, but it is "optional" with three to four orders. When there are more than five orders they should go into "death mode," meaning to ignore all traffic rules. Unsurprisingly, pervasive traffic rule violations inevitably lead to tickets and fines, and even physical injuries. A courier half-jokingly said, "It's a game of cat-and-mouse, the cat [traffic police] gets the excitement, and the mouse [courier] starves to death." The platform and subcontracting stations also impose their own penalties. Couriers are fined by the platform if a customer complains, if they are caught not wearing the official uniform, fail to meet the expected delivery time, or violate other platform rules. The platform frequently requires couriers to prove that they have indeed delivered the order. For example, a courier may leave an order outside the door after the customer does not pick up the phone or answer the door, and they will be fined if the customer later complains. As one courier said, in order to avoid arbitrary fines like this, his station manager requires them to call a customer at least three times, send texts and WeChat messages to the customer when possible, and submit a screenshot of the call record. He observed, "Those who sit in the office don't understand how delivery is in reality."

Station fines are even more arbitrary than those levied by the platform. An attendance requirement, for example, is often used to impose fines. Other requirements pertain to length of time online or number of orders delivered, and

managers have the final say in determining whether a courier has fulfilled the requirements or not. Couriers and stations have also gotten into disputes about platform malfunctions, which can miscalculate work hours or whether certain orders are "real" (ordered by customers) or "fake."[43] One interviewee told us how his station manager reduced his piece rate by one yuan after he took a few minutes break one day—and this minor infraction then disqualified him for the full attendance bonus. Another courier reported that the station held him to the same attendance standard as others despite the fact that he broke his leg in a traffic accident while delivering an order. After Ele.me announced its decision to decentralize to the stations a whole series of critical decisions that shape the work process and bonuses, many couriers complained in WeChat groups that they had no hope to get any bonus in future.

RESISTANCE UNDER THE RADAR

Among the range of grievances, the most common trigger for collective unrest was dissatisfaction over wages and bonuses. The company's new organizational mechanisms were meant to disperse risk and control workers by extensive subcontracting and digital mediation, but these have resulted in widespread resistance. This has produced a particular form of small-scale collective action among workers. This section provides detailed accounts of two strikes by station-based couriers, one in Shanghai and one in Dongguan, and we will refer to a number of other strikes around the country to illustrate common dynamics.

Digital Communication

Communication through digital technology is a key means by which couriers organize resistance. Most of the informants we interviewed confirmed that they are connected with fellow couriers through WeChat groups. Station-based couriers are required to join an official station WeChat group through which management coordinates deliveries and sends announcements. The couriers set up their own WeChat groups to exchange information or just to chat informally. One type is used by couriers from the same station to maximize delivery efficiency. The second type is open to couriers anywhere in China. For instance, the Ele.me

43. Couriers sometimes commit order fraud (刷单 shuadan) in collaboration with local restaurants. This entails the restaurant listing extremely inexpensive items (even less than one yuan) on their menu. Once the order is placed, the restaurant complicit in the order fraud would not actually prepare any food, and couriers pretending to be customers will confirm the arrival of the (nonexistent) delivery. While couriers do not earn any meaningful delivery fee through this process, order frauds improve their delivery statistics, thereby increasing their chances to earn platform bonuses. However, the platform eventually developed countermeasures for red-flagging orders that seem suspicious, and it is likely that this type of fraud has been curbed.

Conversation Club (饿了么闲聊俱乐部) welcomes even non-Ele.me employees. The members are recruited through friends' recommendations and social media promotion.

Through these WeChat groups couriers learn about each other's grievances and concerns, and as a result, the groups sometimes serve as the basis of coordinated collective action. The most common action is for workers to simply stay offline and refuse to take any orders. As noted earlier, the station manager is responsible for chalking up good statistics, and an important metric is the attendance rate and the number of completed orders. Simply by refusing to log into the system, a handful of couriers can cause considerable damage to the station's statistics. While workers in other industries have also relied on social media and digital communication for sharing grievances and organizing strikes, the distinctive feature of couriers' actions is that the strike itself is not visible. This is in contrast to more typical strikes where workers congregate to stop work, organize a picket line outside a workplace, or go on marches in the street in order to draw public attention. Even in cases when workers utilize digital communication, such as the 2014 Walmart workers' strike, these kinds of public manifestations have been the norm.[44]

Organizing and Negotiating via WeChat in Shanghai

A strike launched by station-based couriers in Shanghai in April 2020 reveals the core elements of couriers' resistance. The micro level action began when the station fined a courier 500 yuan for rejecting an order reassigned to him. He found this extremely unfair, as he was only notified of the order reassignment after he had left the restaurant and was already at a distance from it. After coordinating ahead of time with a few colleagues from his station, he announced a new WeChat group at 11:40 a.m. during the peak lunch hour and asked fellow couriers to strike. He also invited the station managers to join the new WeChat group, so they could hear the workers' grievances. Eight colleagues who had been harboring simmering dissatisfaction over a series of stricter rules the new station management had implemented that resulted in de facto wage reductions stayed offline to support him. In this new group of 11 people (eight couriers and three managers), he and the other discontented couriers raised complaints against arbitrary

44. Workers at Walmart relied on social media to connect across localities, but the protests still occurred in physical space. See Chunyun Li and Mingwei Liu, "Overcoming Collective Action Problems Facing Chinese Workers: Lessons from Four Protests against Walmart," *ILR Review* 71, no. 5 (2018): 1078–1105. Similarly, tech workers used Github and other online platforms to raise awareness about the "996" work regime (working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week), but they did not engage in strikes. Kevin Lin, "Tech Worker Organizing in China: A New Model for Workers Battling a Repressive State," *New Labor Forum* 29, no. 2 (2020): 52–59.

fines, sudden piece rate reductions, and insufficient compensation for working in bad weather. The station management first attempted to dismiss these grievances by appealing to station regulations and constraints beyond their control, "I don't get to decide the price. It's just that the evaluation of station statistics is so strict now. No station is relaxed. . . . We're just following the broader environment. Survival of the fittest." When the managers were unable to persuade the enraged couriers, they resorted to threats. Manager Tan sent a screenshot showing that one colleague, Courier Zhen, had already resigned in support of the strike, and instructed the other manager to fire anyone who remained on strike: "You can choose to work for another station that pays more. I am not forcing you to do anything." The managers then targeted couriers one by one, offering minor individualized concessions. They promised the courier who had initiated the strike that future order redispatchments would be notified in advance, and agreed to Courier Zhen's request that he only should need to stay online for peak hours until the end of his contract. Having made such compromises, the managers were not willing to address the more general problem of reduced wages. Since the management showed no sign of compromise, the couriers eventually gave up. After wresting small wins for two individual couriers, this micro work stoppage, organized and negotiated completely online and in full view of management, was brought to an unceremonious conclusion before the lunch hour had even ended.

Striking over Bonuses in Dongguan

The style of organizing collective action in Dongguan was very similar to the Shanghai case. This action was motivated when the station management began excluding some of the workers from the "high-temperature bonus" that couriers receive during the hot summer months. This bonus is not uncommon in China for employees in non-air-conditioned workplaces. The immediate fuse for the strike was when a courier failed to deliver an order on time and was denied this bonus: "My late delivery rate is above 0.3%. No more high-temperature bonus for me." His complaint quickly gained sympathetic replies. Colleagues pointed out that the station's new policy was so strict that it was now impossible for couriers to get their bonus. The courier who had lost his bonus told the WeChat group, "The high-temperature bonus requires us to complete fourteen orders for lunch and dinner peak hours, stay online for twenty-eight days a month, and complete 500 orders a month. This is nonsense, it's impossible." Seventeen out of 28 couriers decided to go on strike and two of them quit their jobs. Seeing this, the manager first attempted to divide the workforce, claiming in the WeChat group that some were part-time couriers governed by different rules. Similar to Shanghai, he warned that the strike would be futile as there would be many more couriers who wanted the jobs. During a short open exchange between him and a manager from a different station, he assumed a couldn't-care-less attitude about losing the two

employees, "I will ask Li (another station manager) to find me more people. He said it's not a problem. I only need new couriers by the end of the month." Despite the manager's confident public stance, a courier texted that the manager felt "a lot of pressure on his shoulders." The spontaneous refusal to accept deliveries had an inconclusive outcome. Nonetheless, the two events clearly demonstrated how quickly workers are able to organize small-scale strikes through WeChat.

Sources of Leverage

These two ministrikes show that while such strikes are by no means always effective, they point to two key types of leverage the couriers could wield. The first is that meal deliverers are able to disrupt a tightly coordinated logistical system relatively simply by not logging into the app. Although there are many couriers working in any given city, there are only so many in a specific business circle.[45] A relatively small number of workers acting together can paralyze delivery within that district. The food industry is also particularly time-sensitive, as the value of prepared food degrades quite quickly, affecting restaurants' business and reputation. Customers have grown accustomed to receiving meals within 30 minutes or less. Moreover, most of the orders are placed during the peak lunch and dinner hours, a critical period from a business standpoint. Even an hour-long work stoppage can greatly affect profits. While the platform can call on couriers from other stations to fill the gap, it takes time for them to travel from one part of the city to another, and many couriers are unwilling to work in unfamiliar areas during peak hours.

This leads to the second source of leverage, management's fear of bad statistics. As part of the platform's evaluation score, station managers can score demerits. Since stations are generally small in size, they are susceptible to even minor disruptions in their labor supply. If a station frequently declines orders due to a lack of workers it is likely to receive a poor evaluation score from the platform, resulting in a smaller bonus, fewer orders in the future, and even the possibility of being merged with other stations. A Shanghai courier noted that "Eighty couriers went on strike today in a neighboring station that has 120 couriers. The station was worried that its statistics would be bad and promised not to reduce the piece rate for the time being." In short, the platform puts the stations under pressure to maintain a stable labor supply to retain its on-time delivery rates, which gives workers an advantage in pressing their claims.

Although the two strikes did not result in substantial gains for the workers, striking is not always futile. One Nanjing courier whom we interviewed related his experience with a successful strike: "About seven or eight couriers went on

45. While crowdsourced couriers are not formally restricted to any region, many of them choose to work in one area that they are more familiar with in order to maximize delivery efficiency.

strike for about a month over low piece rates, and eventually the station manager negotiated with the subcontractor to raise the piece rate by 1 yuan. He had no choice but to raise it. Recruiting new couriers would be difficult because the piece rate he had been offering is so low. New recruits also would have to be trained because they are not familiar with the area, and they too might quit after a while.

Short strikes can also be successful. Another Nanjing courier shared his story: "Our team had thirty to forty people and we all refused to work that day because the piece rate was reduced from 6.5 yuan to 5 yuan. We couriers negotiated a price with the station manager, and he negotiated with the subcontractor. We struck in the morning and the problem was basically solved in the afternoon. The industry is like this. If customers place orders and there's no courier to deliver them, the [station manager] suffers."

In fact, most strikes are resolved quickly, typically within a couple of days regardless of the result. A courier explained how workers' weak marketplace bargaining power made it difficult for them to maintain strikes longer than that, since they can be replaced: "China is not short of people, especially poor people." At the same time, if the strike does not produce satisfactory results after a few days, couriers are frequently not that invested in the job: "We do not mind getting fired. Is this some kind of precious job? As long as we have an e-bike we can work anywhere." This lack of attachment to the job, for better or worse, facilitates risky behavior such as collective work stoppages.

While the focus of this article has been to clarify the features of couriers' resistance, especially its relatively invisible nature, we would be remiss to leave the impression that platform-based couriers *never* engage in more traditional forms of protest such as public street actions. Sometimes workers do so to attract media attention, as another potential source of leverage over their employer. A veteran courier in Beijing observed: "The piece rate was reduced from 10 to 9 yuan when the station was bought by a subcontracting company. Fifty couriers launched a strike at the station office, and the platform quickly intervened to mediate. Normally, if there is dissatisfaction with our wage, the platform would try to quickly satisfy the couriers. If this kind of issue gets inflamed, it could affect the entire Beijing region and attract media attention. There are so many media outlets in Zhongguancun. When things happen, Today's Headlines and Tencent [two popular Chinese electronic media outlets located nearby] would be there. If anyone creates a scene, this would be broadcast the same day. The platform is afraid of being in the headlines." Parallel to this, the workers know that drawing outside attention to a grievance brings risks of state repression—in contrast to the protests carried out completely online, where managers cannot call on the police.[46]

46. Manfred Elfstrom, "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Chinese State Reactions to Labour Unrest," *China Quarterly*, no. 240 (2019): 855–79.

Crowdsourced Couriers' Resistance

Even though crowdsourced couriers' work is highly individualized, the platform sometimes imposes regional changes that affect groups of crowdsourced couriers and trigger collective resistance. While they are not required to join any official work WeChat groups, many of them add fellow couriers to unofficial location-based WeChat groups, as they frequently meet with each other during work. If crowdsourced couriers in a given area oppose a new policy from the platform, they sometimes issue calls to collectively stay offline and refuse to take orders, much like their station-based counterparts. As with station-based courier resistance, crowdsourced couriers' strikes typically do not last long, ranging from a few hours to less than a week.

A few examples suggest that crowdsourced couriers are also most likely to engage in collective mobilization in response to wage issues. A Nanjing courier provided some details about how crowdsourced workers organize: "I've heard about four or five strikes organized by crowdsourced couriers. There were forty or fifty people on strike for a couple of days because the platform reduced the piece rates. They connected up with each other through WeChat. But eventually nothing changed, and the leaders of the strike were blacklisted by the platform." Another Nanjing crowdsourced courier shared a similar story: "A few dozen people went on strike last summer at Changfu Street against the reduction of piece rates. Everyone who went on strike knew each other. They all came from the same hometown. The strike only lasted a noontime and things did not improve at all. There were too many crowdsourced couriers [who did not strike in the area], so the strike wasn't effective." When asked how the platform handled the strike, the courier responded, "The regional manager figured out who the leaders were and blacklisted them. Someone must have ratted them out. He [the manager] had no right to adjust piece rates. There are so many couriers in Nanjing, so it doesn't matter if the manager loses a few dozen people."[47] A Shenzhen station-based courier shared an indirect experience of a crowdsourced courier strike in his region that took place in May 2020. He recalled, "Ele.me's regional management came to our station yesterday complaining that 'At the end of the day, we have to rely on you station-based couriers. Those [crowdsourced couriers] just go head to head with us without hesitation.'" The manager was upset with a day-long crowdsourced courier strike in his district due to low piece rates. The informant quoted the Ele.me manager threatening those who went out on strike, that "I'll take away every crowdsourced order from them." A Beijing courier who once worked in Guangzhou witnessed a

47. We acknowledge the uneven accounts of labor market dynamics presented here, with some managers and workers claiming it is very hard to find replacements, while others suggest it can be done easily. In general, it is more challenging to recruit station-based couriers within a short time frame, which may account for some of the differences. There are also differences across regions and in different times of the year. We are not able to verify the extent to which these subjective assessments reflect actual labor supply.

successful strike there: "Over three hundred people collectively stayed offline for two days. That's about every crowdsourced courier in Meituan and Ele.me had in that region. Eventually, the platforms yielded and did not cut the piece rates."

Despite similar grievances, there are important differences in terms of the kinds of leverage available to crowdsourced and station-based workers. Most importantly, without the intermediary of the subcontracted stations, crowdsourced workers have less workplace bargaining power. Fewer than 10 station-based couriers can bring a station manager to the negotiating table, as the whole business model is predicated on ensuring the station's workers are reliably available for a certain number of hours per day. The approach with crowdsourcing is quite different. Unlike the stations, which keep a relatively fixed work schedule for all workers, the platform promises a flexible work schedule and great autonomy to crowdsourced couriers, allowing them to log in or out anytime they want. As a result, the platform is prepared to manage fluctuations in the available workforce, and a small-scale strike might be dismissed as just another low turnout day.

As a result, the platform would hardly notice if a small group of such workers remained logged out of the app—even the absence of several dozen crowdsourced couriers might not be enough to make the platform's regional manager aware of the strike. Since a region normally has many more couriers than a station does, more crowdsourced couriers are needed to achieve the same level of disruption for the platform's regional manager as a handful of station-based couriers can for their station manager. The distinct style of management and communication also plays a role, with the platform directly controlling crowdsourced workers via the app, whereas station managers have face-to-face and digital contact with their couriers. In this sense, it is somewhat easier for station-based couriers to find a person who might respond to their wage demands. Additionally, the platform's data-oriented evaluation system for subcontractors gives an advantage to station-based couriers that their crowdsourced counterparts do not have. Crowdsourced workers' relative lack of workplace bargaining power suggests that they might need to take an extra step to achieve the same results through collective resistance: this could entail organizing on a larger scale and/or pursuing a more public-attention-seeking form of resistance that brings outside pressure to bear on the platform. It goes without saying that these introduce political risks when compared to station-based workers' hidden and small-scale forms of collective action.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have provided an overview of the organization of work for food-delivery workers, as well as an account of the attendant form of labor unrest that has emerged. Although the platform establishes the general parameters of employment and the algorithm plays a critical role in distributing orders,

employment for station-based workers is highly fractured, as each individual subcontractor maintains a degree of managerial autonomy. This means that worker grievances are experienced as emanating from station-level decisions, even if these decisions are highly structured by the platform's framework. Similarly, couriers' bargaining power derives from their capacity to inflict damage on their immediate employers. Worker resistance is organized at a small scale, targeting the station managers who directly oversee them. These collective actions are organized through WeChat, and sometimes even through employer-created chat rooms, and are generally short in duration. Although these strikes appear to be common, their small scale and digital mediation mean that they remain out of sight of the media and the state, rendering them politically safe. In contrast to platform-based workers' collective actions in other countries, neither station-based nor crowdsourced couriers in China can draw on the associational power of worker centers or unions. Rather, Ele.me's station-based workers' ability to launch strikes is rooted in workplace bargaining power that derives from the platform's just-in-time logistics and evaluative chains that force subcontractors to maintain a steady supply of labor.

What are the implications of this research for our understanding of labor politics in China? Food-delivery workers' resistance shares a number of features common to industrial worker unrest in China. In both cases, informalization and intense market competition have resulted in grievances related to low wages, high work intensity, and workplace safety issues. Resistance in both sectors largely targets a single employer and is organizationally ephemeral. As with their industrial counterparts, food courier demands are largely defensive in nature, and are studiously apolitical. These common features are a consequence of the broader political environment, which is quite hostile to politicized, durable forms of worker organization. Food couriers are just as subject to these pressures as any other worker. In fact, there is a strong possibility that workers from manufacturing are bringing their experiences of resistance into the food-delivery sector as employment for unskilled labor declines in the former and expands in the latter.[48]

There are, however, some features of food couriers' resistance that are distinctive: its low-key and hidden nature whereby, rather than gathering a group to directly confront their employer, disrupt transportation networks, or protest at local government offices, food couriers simply choose not to log in to the app. Even this is not wholly dissimilar to some industrial strikes, as workers will often stay within the factory grounds to avoid repression. But food couriers are able to maintain complete physical invisibility, and each individual worker can "strike" from anywhere. It is this concealed nature, as well as the very small scale, that

48. Kenrick Davis, "China's Laid-off Workers Rush into Food Delivery," *Sixth Tone*, May 22, 2020, https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005691/chinas-laid-off-workers-rush-into-food-delivery#:~:text=Workers%20let%20go%20during%20the,the%20grueling%20job%20even%20tougher.

allows such forms of resistance to remain relatively safe from local government intervention. As we have seen, couriers do sometimes escalate and engage in more public forms of protest intended to attract media attention, and these kinds of actions entail a greater risk of repression. The final distinguishing feature is the food couriers' use of, and indeed their *reliance* on, WeChat as a means for grievance articulation and for organizing collective action. Other kinds of networked strikes have relied on radio and digital forms of communication; but given the prevalence of surveillance and censorship on China's internet, the extent to which couriers are able to carry out all of their activities online is something different.

This suggests a refinement in our understanding of labor politics in contemporary China. In contrast to the prevailing understanding,[49] we have presented evidence that the state is either unable or uninterested in censoring online-based efforts to foment collective action when it involves small scale and ephemeral strikes that do not threaten the carefully manicured image of public order. And given their low profile and highly fractured nature, there is little to suggest that these strikes do pose a political threat. The state seems to have decided that such forms of resistance are a private matter, and not worth intervention either via overt police action or through digital censorship. It is also clear that the development of worker organizing and consciousness is by no means linear—courier resistance is smaller scale and less assertive than has been the case for manufacturing workers. Nonetheless, this investigation does reveal that covert worker unrest remains bubbling beneath the surface, even as the political environment has become less open and the country's economic center of gravity has shifted more toward the service sector.

49. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 326–43.