

# THE PERCEPTION AND RESPONSE OF DAILY WAGE WORKERS TO LABOR PRECARITY

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**Abstract:** Daily wage labor is a significant type of informal employment. This study focuses on the labor process of daily wage workers and discusses their perception of labor precarity and their responses to it. The findings reveal that the labor precarity of daily wage workers is prominently reflected in four aspects: labor opportunities, labor conditions, wage payment, and labor security. The coping strategies of daily wage workers in response to labor precarity are categorized into two types: "stabilization actions" and "destabilization actions". "Stabilization actions" include improving self-skills and security, negotiating with employers and withdrawing from the daily wage labor to avoid risks. On the other hand, "destabilization actions" refer to daily wage workers lowering their self-expectations with a "lying flat" mentality and frequently changing jobs to increase their income. The study indicates that neither of these strategies effectively changes their situation under labor precarity. Instead, these strategies bring about an erosion sense of meaning of labor, which is detrimental to individual development. This research expands the understanding of labor precarity within informal employment, particularly in the context of daily wage labor, and showcases the agency of daily wage workers' perceptions and actions. It provides new insights into exploring possible solutions for addressing labor precarity in daily wage labor.

**Keywords:** Daily Wage Workers; Informal Employment; Labor Precarity; Perception; Actions

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, migrant workers have been a crucial support for China's economic and social development. The 2023 Migrant Workers Monitoring and Survey Report released by the National Bureau of Statistics shows that the total number of migrant workers nationwide reached 297.53 million in 2023, an increase of 1.91 million compared to the previous year[1]. It is noteworthy that while the total number of migrant workers has rapidly increased, there are significant trends of stratification and diversification within the group[2]. Among them, the daily wage workers represented by "Sanhe Dashen" triggered a discussion on migrant workers[3]. These "Dashen" are referred to as "daily wage workers" or "casual laborers" in different studies, they often gather in informal labor markets or even by the side of the road in cities waiting for employers to hire them, becoming an essential part of the current Chinese labor market. A study involving 2, 043 migrant workers pointed out the increasing trend of "short-term employment" among migrant workers, characterized by high mobility and high unemployment rates[6].

Although the emergence of the daily wage labor system has provided migrant workers with more diverse and flexible job opportunities, daily wage workers face significant labor precarity during the development of this system. On one hand, the nature of daily wage labor leads to potential long gaps between jobs, causing fluctuations in job opportunities and income. On the other hand, the absence of stable labor relations makes it difficult for workers to secure their rights, and the prevalence of informal labor intermediaries often results in wage exploitation and employment disputes[3, 7]. Meanwhile, multiple factors such as individual pursuits and social realities have also led to workers' inability to achieve ideal working conditions, leaving them adrift in a foreign land, becoming "suspended" individuals[5].

In January 2024, The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of People's Republic of China issued the "Notice on Strengthening the Standardized Construction of the Odd-labor Market", emphasizing the integration of the odd-labor market into the public employment service system[8]. This notice aims to coordinate with relevant departments to regulate market order and protect the rights and interests of odd-laborers. This reflects China's concern for the daily wage labor, setting clear requirements and directions for the development of the daily wage system in the new era.

Based on this, this paper focuses on daily wage workers as the research subject and conducts an empirical study of daily wage workers in Beijing's labor market. It outlines the manifestations of labor precarity in daily wage labor and explores the diverse action strategies and consequences that daily wage workers adopt in response to labor precarity, thereby elucidating their flexible subjective experiences.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Research on Precarity

The growth of international markets has resulted in a greater focus on maximizing productivity and a push to enhance market competitiveness among businesses in the labor market. Unlike the labor practices of the Fordist production line, the post-Ford capitalist production system has resulted in a rise in non-standard work arrangements and temporary employment opportunities for workers. There is a decline in employer-provided insurance for workers and a deterioration of traditional forms of institutional protection for employees[9]. Consequently, labor groups are currently confronted with market risks and uncertainties. Within this framework, job insecurity and vulnerability among workers intensified, leading to labor characterized by increasing "precarity".

"Precarity" is a condition of uncertainty, instability, and insecurity. More precisely, it refers to the lack of stability in labor that does not have a formal labor contract, a constant employment relationship, or sufficient social security. However, in a broader context, it may include the absence of safety in one's living conditions, flow instability, and the uncertainty of the surroundings. Guy Standing utilizes "precariat" to describe the rising workforce and various forms of employment in the globalized economy[10]. That refers to laborers and labor forms that lack stable employment or regular income, as well as lacking occupational identity and collective consciousness.

The labor precarity manifests in various ways throughout the labor process. In terms of employment forms and institutions, a study of 65 workers in South Africa found that practitioners under such non-standard employment arrangements lack a sense of work-related identity. They experienced high levels of uncertainty and stress due to temporary contracts and inadequate legal protection. This worsened their already precarious situations [11]. In terms of labor control, according to Zheng Guanghuai et al. (2015), informal employees often encounter precarious, volatile, and physically strenuous job situations in labor control[12]. They frequently face the possibility of not getting their wages and are subjected to coercive manipulation, such as overtime and high-intensity labor. Regarding labor relations, the lack of labor organization among informal workers has decreased inter-worker coordination in the context of labor relations. As a result, employers control the workforce and the labor process using measures including surveillance and threats[11]. This exacerbates power disparities between employers and laborers, constraining the independence and bargaining power of the informal workforce in the workplace [13]. The labor precarity is also apparent in the absence of social insurance and the restricted prospects for economic expansion[14], leading to both physical and psychological vulnerability for workers. Moreover, this circumstance exacerbates economic disparity, insecurity, and volatility[9].

Hannah Lewis and other researchers employ 'hyper precarity' to elucidate the elevated levels of instability, enslavement, and other forms of precarity experienced by international migrant laborers[15]. The study emphasizes that under neoliberalism, international workers encounter substantial obstacles in the labor market due to their disadvantaged socio-legal status, restrictive immigration status, and considerable livelihood pressure. They suffer from severe labor exploitation and are locked in a situation of acute precarity and forced work.

Regarding measures to deal with labor precarity, research has suggested that workers strengthen their job stability by keeping silent, avoiding being labeled [16], bargaining wages, and creating close ties with their clients [11]. Bernstein (2006) emphasizes that in the current labor market, individuals likely must take personal responsibility for acquiring and maintaining their skills[17]. This helps to decrease the uncertainty and unemployment risk caused by informal work. Assimilation into the local culture is an active attempt to deal with precariousness. Peng Qingen(1996) argues that migratory workers amass capital by creating their own relationship network to enhance their position in the workplace and build formal arrangements to address labor precarity[18].

While enhancing stability is a common strategy employed by informal employment collectives to deal with precarity, previous studies have also revealed that certain workers strive for "Self-destabilization". Kathleen Millar researched unpaid labor in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She found that scavengers in urban poverty encountered difficulties in transitioning to secure jobs due to the mismatch between the stability of formal work and the mutability of living conditions they faced, such as the frequent requirement for temporary housing changes[19]. The unpredictability of life drives scavengers to participate in highly demanding and unpredictable work in rubbish dumps, therefore giving up their hopes for steady employment. Similarly, informal employees in China often choose to relocate in order to find better job prospects, a phenomenon referred to as "voting with their feet." This frequent switching of jobs, although it may result in precarity, is a commonly used strategy to achieve a slight increase in income [20].

## **2.2 Research on Daily Wage Workers**

Daily Wage Labor is a prominent type of informal employment. Nevertheless, the precise definition of "daily wage worker" is ambiguous in current research, as multiple studies use terms such as "flexible employment", "odd-laborer", and "migrant worker". These terms are interconnected in various research, as they all relate to daily wage workers. The concept of "migrant workers" is broader and can be considered overlapping with but not entirely identical to the group of daily wage laborers. "Flexible employment" primarily emphasizes differences from the traditional factory system and mainstream employment in terms of working hours, income, insurance, and other related aspects[21]. In recent years, research on flexible employment has increasingly focused on workers employed in new forms of businesses, often leveraging the internet and other technological platforms[22].The "odd-laborer" primarily denotes urban migrant workers engaged in diverse "informal" occupations[23]. They do not have an employer-employee relationship, are not subject to government regulation, and have low income levels[2]. Additionally, there is no specific regulation on the method of wage settlement for these workers.

Tian Feng and Lin Kaixuan (2020) provide a more exact concept of daily wage labor in their book "Wouldn't You Wish to Return: A Survey of Sanhe Youth". Their attention lies on the wage settlement cycle of workers. For example,

workers commence their tasks in the morning and conclude them in the evening, and then they promptly obtain remuneration from the team leader upon completion of their labor. Additionally, in projects that last for numerous days, workers are given 80 to 90 percent of their daily salaries after each day, with a tiny percentage being retained as a form of leverage to guarantee the completion of the entire duration[4]. That is, workers who use days as the primary unit for measuring labor and determining wages [24]. The laborers' activities in the daily wage market can be classified into three primary segments: searching for employment, performing actual labor, and settling wages[25]. Daily wage labor is becoming more popular among workers due to its flexibility. In addition, the emergence of works such as "Sanhe Dashen" has introduced daily wage work as a new type of labor in both public and academic domains [26].

It is crucial that although daily wage employment is on a vast scale and overgrowing, daily wage workers encounter a considerable quandary of precarity in multiple aspects. Daily wage workers often face challenges such as Working window period fluctuation, withheld wages, and the lack of social security[3]. The daily wage labor arrangement is a primary factor contributing to their precarity. This system is distinguished by a significant frequency of temporary posts, leading to little endeavors to uphold labor stability. The lack of government intervention and security intensifies the vulnerability of daily wage workers, impacting their employment, personal lives, family relationships, interpersonal communication, and future opportunities[26]. Daily wage workers who are informally employed do not qualify for household registration and are not included in the social security system[2]. Another matter of apprehension is to the intermediaries engaged in the daily wage system. They wield considerable influence as the intermediary and leverage their network of connections to manipulate job prospects. This exacerbates the predicament of jobless individuals and enables them to exploit workers' remuneration and reduce overtime compensation by capitalizing on the dearth of information[5]. Moreover, the daily wage system's precarity is reflected in life. In Zhao Wei's (2021) analysis, the daily wage workers' group demonstrates the characteristic traits of "dual embeddedness": they have experienced a prolonged disconnection from rural life and are geographically remote from the local community[27]. Furthermore, they do not possess certain employment and have stayed outside the urban workforce for a significant period. Consequently, they are disembedded from both urban and rural systems.

In order to alleviate the labor precarity, workers have also adopted various strategies. On the one hand, they oppose the oppressive and undemocratic environment of the factory and opt to sustain themselves in the "unrestricted" informal economy [3]; on the other hand, they are compelled to make concessions to the more "secure" factory system due to the economic and social demands of urban living[28]. However, this pendulum-like "double movement" between flexibility and security[9] exacerbates the tug-of-war between labor survival pressure and physical and mental inertia, making it difficult to truly change the predicament of labor precarity[3]. Furthermore, Han Yanchao (2021) found in his research that daily wage workers, when faced with unfair treatment such as wage deductions, actively seek redress[29]. However, they often encounter challenges such as the lack of effective self-protection measures and the absence of protection afforded by labor contracts. Consequently, they eventually adopt a passive attitude of "eating while waiting to die" as a new mode of resistance against the alienation of industrial society and the dominance of capital.

Based on the supplied literature review, existing studies reveal the dilemma of labor precarity and the coping behavior of daily wage labor in informal employment. It is essential to recognize that many studies have found that daily wage workers use various strategies when faced with precarious employment. However, most of these studies examine the topic assuming that daily wage workers "reject precarity". This assumption somewhat ignores the diverse subjective attitudes and mobility that daily wage workers have. Based on the precarity theory, this study takes the group of daily wage workers as the research object. We examine the embodiment of informal employment precarity in the daily wage labor. This research also discusses the main actions of laborers, especially the initiative and flexibility of the main body of them.

### 3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study combines field observation and interview. From October to November 2023, the researcher and team members conducted a study on informal employment of daily wage workers at the Majuqiao and Lishuiqiao labor markets in Beijing. On one hand, we observed the environmental conditions, recruitment methods, and waiting processes at these two major labor markets. On the other hand, we conducted preliminary conversations with daily wage workers in the labor markets, covering their work patterns, wage fluctuations, labor disputes, and personal experiences, etc. Additionally, we collected the contact information of the laborers to facilitate follow-up interviews.

From January to February 2024, the researcher and team members organized and analyzed the collected offline data, then drafting an interview outline and conducted semi-structured online interviews with daily wage workers, focusing on the key issue of labor precarity. The interview topics included reasons for choosing daily wage work, methods of finding such jobs, wage payment forms, labor security, and labor control. Additionally, we inquired about the workers' strategies for coping with labor-related risks. The researchers recruited interviewees in three ways: first, by asking for the intention to be interviewed in turn based on the contact information collected during the field observation; second, we used the snowball sampling method, whereby daily wage workers interviewed through the first method were asked to refer peers for further interviews; and third, we identify individuals with experience in daily wage work in our own social network. Through these three recruitment methods, a total of 23 interviewees were contacted. The majority were recruited through the first two methods, with only one recruited through personal social connections.

The basic information of the 23 interviewees is presented in Table 1. Their ages range from 31 to 65 years old, with an average age of 48 years. The interviewed daily wage workers are primarily engaged in construction, renovation, and

domestic services. Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees had previous experience in other forms of informal employment before engaging in daily wage labor, such as security, cleaning, landscaping, and construction work. A few interviewees had prior experience in formal occupations such as company employees.

**Table 1** Interviewee Demographics

Encodings	Ages	Gender	Work Experience	Daily Wage Labor Duration
001	41	male	security guard; daily wage worker	9 years, ongoing
002	57	male	daily wage worker	3 months, ongoing
003	40	male	security guard; daily wage worker	6 years, multiple job changes
004	58	male	construction worker; daily wage worker	4 years, ongoing
005	65	male	construction worker; daily wage worker	1 year, ongoing
006	35	male	company worker; daily wage worker	3 months, planning to exit
007	38	male	janitor; daily wage worker	4 years, ongoing
008	53	male	security guard; caregiver; daily wage worker	3 years, planning to exit
009	60	male	security guard; groundskeeper; daily wage worker	10 years, planning to exit
010	50	male	daily wage worker	1 year, ongoing
011	56	male	miner; daily wage worker	15 years, ongoing
012	53	male	daily wage worker	1 year, ongoing
013	39	male	company worker; daily wage worker	22 years, ongoing
014	51	male	construction worker; daily wage worker	10 years, ongoing
015	59	male	janitor; daily wage worker	20 years, multiple job changes
016	62	female	domestic worker; daily wage worker	1 year, ongoing
017	37	male	company worker; daily wage worker	2 years, ongoing
018	31	male	factory worker; daily wage worker	6 years, ongoing
019	40	male	farmer; daily wage worker	8 years, alternating with farming
020	45	male	company worker; daily wage worker	4 years, partially exited
021	35	male	security guard; daily wage worker	10 years, already exited
022	35	male	factory worker; daily wage worker	6 years, ongoing
023	63	female	textile worker; daily wage worker	8 years, already exited

The interviews were conducted entirely online, with an average interview time of approximately 1 hour per participant. Prior to the interviews, the researchers and team members briefed the interviewees on the purpose, topics, basic content, and usage of interview data. With the informed consent of the interviewees, all interview sessions were recorded for documentation purposes.

#### 4 PERCEPTION OF LABOR PRECARIETY AMONG DALIY WAGE WORKERS

Daily Wage Labor, an informal employment modality, is distinguished by its inherent volatility and susceptibility to change. Within the domain of the Daily Wage Labor market, workers confront a plethora of adversities, including suboptimal remuneration, tenuous job security, and elevated exposure to occupational hazards, all of which underscore the profound precarity of their employment. This study leverages qualitative interview data to elucidate the "hyper-precariety" of the labor conditions experienced by Daily Wage Workers. The analysis is structured around four pivotal dimensions: the availability of labor opportunities, the condition of labor performed, the remuneration received for labor, and the protective measures in place for laborers.

##### 4.1 Waiting and Monopoly: The Hyper-Precarity of Labor Opportunities

Daily Wage Labor, a flexible and accessible employment category, exerts a strong pull on the workforce, offering a viable means of subsistence and serving as an initial stepping stone for those aspiring to explore opportunities in metropolitan areas. The current landscape of the daily wage labor market is predominantly dominated by positions within the construction and renovation sectors[23], The labor demand in these industries is subject to seasonal and

climatic vicissitudes; notably, there is a pronounced downturn in work availability during the winter months, reflecting the inherent precarity of these job markets.

Furthermore, the surge of new entrants into the labor force exacerbates the existing tension between labor supply and demand, resulting in a pronounced oversupply of labor. Consequently, a significant cohort of workers may encounter extended periods of unemployment, colloquially referred to as "not receiving orders." In response to this precarious job market, workers adopt the strategy of arriving at the labor market at the crack of dawn to secure a preferential position in the queue for potential employers' recruitment.

"I was there waiting by five in the morning, as that's the nature of our market. The number of employers seeking workers is already limited, and after eight o'clock, there's essentially no work to be found, which would mean another day without employment." (Interviewee 015)

Nevertheless, the quotidian reality for daily wage workers is one of protracted anticipation, where employment opportunities are often ephemeral and disjointed. The common interlude of unemployment, lasting a day or two, is perceived as the typical frequency of gaps between jobs. In the arid season of labor demand, the situation is further exacerbated, with some interviewees revealing that they have faced stretches of three to four months without securing any employment.

"It all depends on your luck, sometimes you can find work, sometimes you can't, and then you just have to wait, which means there are days when you just can't earn any money." (Interviewee 023)

Within the daily wage labor system, in addition to the aforementioned method where daily wage workers await employment opportunities at labor markets, obtaining work resources through intermediary agencies constitutes an avenue for laborers in their quest for employment opportunities. These agencies serve as a bridge linking daily wage workers with employers, offering an array of recruitment information that enriches the workers' opportunities. However, the non-standard practices and "monopolistic" behaviors of intermediaries have further intensified the precarity of employment opportunities for daily wage workers.

In the Beijing daily wage labor market, intermediaries exhibit a variety of forms. "Yupao Network" is a frequently utilized online platform by daily wage workers, serving as an online recruitment portal that connects employers posting job vacancies with job seekers in search of employment opportunities. However, the platform operates on a point system, where users are required to earn points through daily sign-ins, inviting friends, or purchasing them, and subsequently spend these points to access the contact details of job postings. Through this mechanism, the platform effectively imposes intermediary charges, yet in the process, it escalates the temporal and economic costs borne by workers in their pursuit of job opportunities. Additionally, the job postings on online platforms are characterized by their immediacy and potential for delay. Respondents in the interviews have highlighted instances where they have made payments to obtain contact numbers, only to discover that the employers' recruitment needs have been satisfied. Although a refund is ostensibly available through customer service negotiation, the intricacies of the process have led many workers to relinquish their pursuit of reimbursement, consequently incurring a loss of both monetary and temporal resources.

In the periphery of the daily wage labor market, a multitude of offline intermediary agencies are prevalent. Diverging from the point system employed by platforms such as Yupao, these agencies operate on a membership fee basis, mandating workers to pay a fixed sum periodically—either monthly or annually—to gain access to recruitment resources. Furthermore, as intermediaries, they also levy a commission from the workers' remuneration.

"We pay an introduction fee to them every month, and if they have suitable work, they recommend it to me... In fact, there isn't an abundance of work at the agency. We also rely on luck when looking for work in the market. With the agency, we don't have to wait ourselves. However, if you choose the path of agency connections, you definitely won't get a high salary, as they have to account for their commission." (Interviewee 005)

The sustained demand for labor has led to the establishment of a coherent system between certain construction sites, companies, or employers and labor intermediaries. These intermediaries, leveraging their extensive relational resources, have access to a plethora of recruitment opportunities. According to Burt's (1992) theory of "Structural Holes" presented in his seminal work, intermediaries occupy a pivotal position between laborers and employers[30]. This positioning necessitates that both laborers and employers rely on intermediaries to establish contact with each other. From a macroscopic perspective of the interpersonal network, this intermediary role appears to create "gaps" or "cavities" within the overall structure of social relations. Labor market intermediaries occupy a significant number of these structural holes within interpersonal networks, thereby wielding dual advantages of resource conservation and information control[31]. However, the absolute advantage of intermediaries as connectors has made it more challenging for daily wage workers to access work resources through their own social networks or by waiting. The likelihood of workers securing employment opportunities independently is diminished, and the control over their labor pace becomes increasingly tenuous. As a result, the precarity of daily wage labor in terms of labor opportunities significantly increases.

#### **4.2 Overwork and Peril: The Hyper-Precarity of Labor Conditions**

The "hyper- precarity " of labor conditions is primarily reflected in the oppressive nature of labor intensity and the risks associated with the working environment. In the labor market, the employment relationship between daily wage workers and employers is often informal, with verbal agreements that leave workers unable to anticipate job-related risks and without means to defend their rights. This situation provides employers with opportunities to exploit daily wage workers, leading to frequent occurrences of excessively long working hours and high labor intensity. A significant



number of interviewees in the study expressed that daily wage work leaves them feeling "extremely tired, " with physical fatigue contributing to their stress. The oversupply of workers in the labor market and the scarcity of daily wage jobs also imply a lack of "autonomy" and "bargaining power" among daily wage workers. This is manifested in their inability to freely control the intensity of work or to withdraw from work at will, and negotiating wages with employers is considered unattainable[11]. As long as they fail to meet the employer's satisfaction, the employer can terminate their employment relationship at will.

"The employer is not short of workers, so they only offer this meager pay. It's take-it-or-leave-it; if you don't want to do it, there are plenty who would jump at the opportunity." ( Interviewee 001)

"The daily workload extends to nearly ten hours or more, all of it is comprised entirely of physically demanding labor. Moreover, you have to obey their (the employer's) orders. They dictate how you should work, and Non-compliance with their directives results in immediate dismissal." ( Interviewee 022)

On another note, the completion cycle of a daily wage labor is determined by the fulfillment of work content rather than a set number of working days. When daily wage workers "take on a new task, " they have the autonomy to plan their daily work within the timeframe set by the employer. However, this seemingly self-determined work system actually intensifies the precarity of their labor intensity. Huang Zhihui (2013) articulated the concept of "self-production regime, " which contrasts with the structured labor environment of the factory system[32]. This regime refers to a production form that relies solely on the labor of the individual or their family members, without a defined labor-capital or employment relationship. In this paradigm, laborers appear to possess a superficial "independence, " yet they are, in reality, subject to the dictates of the market "system." For instance, once daily wage workers undertake a task, any deviation or slacking off within their self-managed labor domain leads to a waste of their working time, ultimately harming their own interests. Consequently, they often engage in self-surveillance, pushing themselves to remain constantly productive, in an effort to secure more working hours and thereby "take on" an increased workload.

"The amount of work we do each day is up to ourselves. If you feel too exhausted, you work less for the day; if you're not tired or are in good physical condition, you can work longer. You manage the tasks you've undertaken and pace yourself accordingly, aiming to finish quickly so you can move on to the next job, potentially earning more within the month." (Interviewee 005)

In terms of the work environment, daily wage workers are exposed to various risks during both the process of working and job seeking. Given that the work of daily wage laborers often involves heavy physical labor, construction work, and specialized cleaning tasks such as high-altitude window washing, the nature of these jobs entails a heightened risk of physical injury. Adverse working conditions, including high temperatures, dust, and noise, also significantly impact the health of the workers.

As the primary venue for daily wage workers to seek employment, labor markets also harbor precarity risks, mainly manifested in unsafe environments and the frequent occurrence of information fraud. In the case of the Majuqiao daily wage labor market, located in the southwestern part of Tongzhou District in Beijing, the area is a quintessential urban-rural junction. The peripheral villages exhibit a disordered environment, and the labor market is populated by individuals with diverse backgrounds and levels of expertise. Furthermore, the absence of robust oversight in the labor market results in frequent incidents and a chaotic order, which poses a challenge to ensuring the safety and security of daily wage workers.

In terms of information security, on one hand, the daily wage labor market is a mixed environment where fraud is rampant. there is a prevalent issue of identity and payment information being fraudulently obtained under the guise of recruitment, which poses a significant risk to workers' personal privacy. in addition to conventional daily wage jobs such as construction and cleaning, the labor market also encompasses informal sectors like event staffing and order fabrication. The presence of these less conventional opportunities creates a breeding ground for illicit actors who may offer fake job prospects and exploit workers by demanding the sale of their identity documents and bank cards, thereby exposing daily wage workers to unpredictable and severe dangers.

During the course of our investigation, several respondents disclosed having been victims of fraudulent activities. Furthermore, a significant number of participants approached our interviews with caution, likely stemming from their own experiences or observations of others falling prey to deception. This serves as a clear indication of the pervasive nature of such instances of information fraud.

"I used to sell my bank cards. He asked me to transfer money to him via WeChat first, and then he would transfer it back to me. I thought it was just a simple money transaction and didn't think much of it. But in the past two years, with the rise of telephone fraud, I realized that this is also a scam." (Interviewee 017)

"Are you sure this isn't a scam? We've had experiences like this before; they communicate with us over the phone and record our calls to track our numbers, so I'm quite vigilant about such matters, " (Interviewee 021)

### **4.3 Arrears and Exploitation: The Hyper-Precarity of Wage Payment**

The precarity in wage payment, a critical concern for daily wage workers, should not be overlooked. Within the daily wage system, two common employment models typically exist: one is direct engagement with employers, and the other involves working through brokers or intermediaries. Generally, the direct contact model is more favored by daily wage workers, who, in interviews, often believe that direct recruitment by employers is more "reliable." Under this direct engagement model, both parties can negotiate and communicate wages immediately, making wage settlement and

payment more convenient, ' a portion is often settled before starting the work, and the remainder is paid immediately upon completion', as stated by Interviewee 004. And the instances of wage arrears are rare.

Jobs obtained through labor brokers often pertain to large-scale construction sites. Daily wage workers are typically only able to connect with the "small contractors" who recruit them and are unable to directly contact the employers. They must rely on intermediaries to receive relevant information. This situation provides intermediaries with opportunities to embezzle funds. Shen Yuan (2007) has noted that workers are compelled to be integrated into the relational structure of construction sites[33]. This integration has given rise to a new form of exploitative "hegemony" by labor contractors leveraging "relationships." In terms of wage payment, both large and small labor contractors often deceive workers with the excuse that "funding has not been allocated from above," rendering the workers the ultimate victims of this relational hegemony.

"I had worked for a month in Xiong'an, and now it has been four or five months since then, yet I have not received my payment... The contact person was a subcontractor, and I was working under him. All I could do was call him, but he kept evading us workers by claiming that the main contractor above him had not paid him... In the end, we were unable to get our wages." (Interviewee 002)

The precarity in wage payment is further exemplified by the tiered subcontracting of projects and the commissions taken by intermediaries. In the pursuit of profit, some construction companies adopt subcontracting and affiliation as methods to undertake projects. From the general contracting to the project contracting, the management system of the construction industry has evolved into a subcontracting pyramid. Under the multi-tiered subcontracting framework, the deductions imposed by labor contractors contribute to a relentless erosion of financial resources. The proliferation of triangular debts has led to significant capital shortfalls in construction projects. Subcontractors at the lower tiers face substantial pressure to advance funds, The wages of daily wage laborers are situated at the terminal end of an elongated financial chain, which consequently renders their receipt of payment exceedingly challenging[34]. The situation is often prone to the malicious withholding of workers' wages. Similarly, in addition to the aforementioned collection of intermediary membership fees, the intermediary agencies also engage in wage deductions and profiting from price disparities. These practices lead to wages for jobs that workers obtained through intermediaries being lower than market rates, thereby exacerbating the precarity in the daily wage system's payment structure.

"The labor contractors often profit from the 'headcount money,' as the bosses do not approach us directly; they find us through these contractors. The contractors all take a cut. The boss offers a wage of 300, but they announce it at the market for 220, 230, and they make money this way." (Interviewee 017)

"When we find work through the intermediary agencies, they take a portion of our earnings. So after working for a few days, what we earn is barely enough for food and shelter. There's no extra money left for anything else." (Interviewee 015)

#### **4.4 Absence of Insurance and Law: The Hyper-Precarity of Labor Security**

In formal labor relations, employers usually are obligated to provide social insurance and sign labor contracts to ensure employment stability. Nevertheless, the daily wage labor market is distinguished by non-standard employment relationship of short duration. Employers often fail to offer industrial injury insurance and other related social insurance coverage to daily wage workers, resulting in the transfer of risks from employers to workers. The current social security system in the city functions primarily as a mechanism in which both employers and employees contribute simultaneously. Daily wage laborers, who regularly relocate inside the city, typically lack the household registration qualification. In addition, their classification as casual laborers exacerbates their lack unit organization support from employers and are consequently excluded from the social security system[2]. Given the lack of favorable social conditions, daily wage workers must obtain suitable insurance to protect their work and personal welfare. Nevertheless, most of the daily wage workers interviewed did not purchase relevant social insurance for themselves, primarily due to their inadequate comprehension and financial limitations. Uninsured daily wage workers must personally bear the financial burden of their medical costs and income loss if they experience an accident or work-related injury. This exacerbates the health and economic risks they encounter and leaves them in a state of profound vulnerability and 'Hyper Precarity'.

"Buy insurance? Where can I get the money? I know it is better to buy insurance, but I don't have any money, and I can barely feed myself; how am I going to buy this insurance?" (Interviewee 022)

Additionally, the labor process of daily wage workers is in the vacuum region of legal protection. The abundance of labor and the limited availability of job possibilities lead to persistent excess supply in the labor market, resulting in a traditional "buyer's market"[35]. Consequently, daily wage workers face a disadvantage when it comes to communicating with employees. The asymmetry and incompleteness of information make the contractual relationship between labor and management unequal. Additionally, since many employers are small businesses or individuals, they often do not sign formal contracts with workers, relying instead on verbal agreements. However, the ambiguity around the rights and responsibilities of both parties, coupled with the absence of standards in the protection system[36], exacerbates the labor risks experienced by daily wage workers.

"We don't have a labor contract in this line of work; we work hard and suffer, and if something happens to us, we usually don't have a contract, and no one cares about us at all." (Interviewee 012)

Ultimately, the insufficient comprehension and restricted capability of daily wage workers to safeguard their rights exacerbates the precarity of their work. On the one hand, due to the lack of formal labor contracts and procedures with

labor departments, the employment relationship between daily wage workers and their employers is often ambiguous. This ambiguity can lead to difficulties in having labor disputes recognized by labor departments, leaving arbitration, courts, and other institutions as the only recourse for resolution[36]. However, the high costs associated with these legal processes, combined with the generally low educational levels and weak legal awareness among the workers, mean they often lack the capacity to defend their rights effectively. Consequently, they frequently choose to forgo legal means to protect their rights, perpetuating a vicious cycle of labor risk.

On the other hand, the lack of a structured institution within the transient and flexible daily wage labor collective impedes the strength of workers' coalitions and reduces their capacity to efficiently collaborate in safeguarding their entitlements[9].

## 5 RESPONSE OF DAILY WAGE WORKERS TO LABOR PRECARIETY

As workers with agency, daily wage workers exhibit diverse behavioral strategies in response to the precarity of the daily wage labor system. While the pursuit of stability is a common choice among workers in the informal employment market, as noted by Katherine Millar's research, stable employment may not suit the lifestyle of all day laborers. They need to adjust flexibly to align with their psychological attitudes and objective conditions in different situations. Interview data reveals that day laborers adopt various actions in the face of the "Hyper Precarity" of daily wage labor, including both stabilization actions and destabilization actions.

### 5.1 Stabilization Actions

#### 5.1.1 Self-Improvement and negotiated rights protection

Driven by the pursuit of individuality and the positive promotion of objective conditions, some of the daily wage workers have a more positive attitude towards daily wage labor, and under the influence of this mentality, this group of laborers has made many positive attempts in "how to do better daily wage worker".

Internally, they consciously improve their self-security, mainly in terms of safety, relationship networks and self-skills. Firstly, in response to the harsh working conditions and environments of day labor, those with a stronger sense of protection often choose to purchase accident insurance for themselves. Given their economic constraints, they tend to "buy insurance based on the duration of the work" (Interviewee 005). Additionally, refusing potentially dangerous jobs is a common risk-avoidance strategy among daily wage workers. Secondly, the difficulty of finding a job is the most precarious aspect of the daily wage system, and in order to cope with this problem, some daily wage workers choose to improve their skills in order to expand the range of job choices, while some strive to establish good communication with their hometowns, fellow workers, and even intermediaries, expanding their own social networks, and attempting to break the phenomenon of "hegemony of relationships" in the labor market.

Externally, daily wage workers also attempt to negotiate or defend their rights. On one hand, Anwar (2019) interprets wage negotiation as a form of indirect resistance[11]. Daily wage workers can negotiate their wages with employers before accepting a job, based on factors such as the nature and duration of the work. However, given the relatively fixed wage standards in the market, negotiating for benefits is more common. For instance, it is quite usual for day laborers to request that employers provide lunch during work hours. On the other hand, when it comes to labor control such as overtime work, daily wage workers can protect their own interests by refusing unreasonable demands; and when faced with wage differences and wage arrears, protesting or reflecting through formal channels are coping strategies for daily wage workers.

"We will ask in advance, 'If I work at your place today, who will handle the meal?'" Additionally, regarding drinking water, some employers provide it, so we sometimes try to negotiate for that." (Interviewee 023)

"If the overtime pay is inadequate and we are exhausted, we are unwilling to work... Sometimes, if a construction site offers different wages to two groups of workers, we will definitely confront the contractor about it." (Interviewee 018)

#### 5.1.2 Exiting the daily wage system to avoid risks

Exiting the daily wage system is a common behavioral strategy to avoid labor precarity in the daily wage system. While this exit behavior also contributes to stabilization, it differs from the proactive "self-improvement and negotiated rights protection" behavior driven by a positive attitude. The emergence of exit behavior is mainly due to the influence of the hyper precarity of the daily wage labor system, making it difficult for daily wage workers to meet their livelihood needs or causing significant psychological burdens. In such a context of pessimism, daily wage workers choose to quit the daily wage system and seek stable jobs.

It is noteworthy that exiting behavior requires daily wage workers to have relative individual capital to secure stable employment after exiting. During interviews, this assurance mainly manifests in two aspects: firstly, laborers with land or other capital as a livelihood guarantee return to their hometowns to avoid the precarity of daily wage labor employment; secondly, workers with certain skills find alternative stable jobs, proactively exiting the precarious daily wage labor system.

At this first level, daily wage workers are often compelled by harsh economic realities. The precarity of daily wage labor significantly impacts their normal lives, exacerbating their difficulties if they continue within this system. However, they often possess capital back home that can support a more stable livelihood. In such cases, returning home becomes the preferable option. For instance, Interviewee 009, constrained by age limitations, finds it challenging to



secure work opportunities within the daily wage labor system, particularly in urban areas with high living costs. With land back home that belongs to him, after careful consideration, he ultimately decides to return to his hometown.

"I plan to return to my hometown next year. The cost of living in Beijing is too high, and as I grow older, it's hard for me to find work. Back home, I can farm the land, and my spouse and I can live a decent life together." (Interviewee 009)

Other daily wage workers have "escaped" the precarity of the daily circle by relying on their own skills and capital. Interviewee 020, who studied electronics technology in radio and television engineering, used his skills to secure a formal job in a television station repairing television towers and transmitters, with the daily wage system as a supplement to a small amount of free time, which better mitigated the risk of precarity in the daily wage system.

I have a specialty, my specialty is in electrician or surveillance installation, TV tower maintenance, so I'm working at the TV station now, and it's much more stable. I don't have to be on duty every day at the TV station, but if I want to, I can come out and look for another job during my breaks. (Interviewee 020)

## 5.2 Destabilization Actions

### 5.2.1 Resigned to "lying flat"

Although sharing a negative attitude towards the daily wage labor system akin to the group opting for "Exiting the Day Wage System," daily wage workers choosing to "lie flat" often do so due to individual constraints, with no sufficient capital to alter their circumstances. For a segment of daily wage workers, daily wage labor as a form of unstable employment, represents a second-rate choice when they cannot secure formal job opportunities for survival. Restrictions on age imposed by factories force some older workers, who still need to support their families financially, to seek employment opportunities elsewhere. The low entry barriers of the daily wage labor system provide them with an option. Additionally, a certain proportion of daily wage workers are compelled to choose daily wage labor due to factors such as educational background, skills, or even a criminal record.

This part of the group tends to be more negative in their mentality. In the face of the high intensity and poor working conditions as well as the cheating and profit-taking of the intermediaries, most of them do not have a way to break free and change, and they tend to choose to endure and submit to all kinds of unreasonable treatments, believing that the unhappiness felt in the daily wage labor is something that they have to bear for choosing to work as daily wage laborers. Even, they have adapted to and fully accepted the precarity of daily wage labor. For example, in the interviews, it was found that some of the daily wage workers have already acquiesced to the risks that labor poses to their bodies and health, and believe that physical injuries such as cuts on hands or injuries to feet as "normal occurrences that everyone has to endure".

Under this kind of obedience, a group of daily wage workers gradually adopt a "lying flat" mentality. The setbacks and hardships experienced in previous employment, the breakdown of social networks during urban-rural migration, and the experience of "working one day and playing three days" in the daily wage labor market have granted them a certain degree of labor "freedom" while simultaneously fostering individual "inertia"[3].

"I have no connections, no skills. Which regular job would want me? I can only work for a day, so be it. I don't know any big bosses anyway. Even if I stick with this (daily wage job) until the end, I'll only earn 150 a day. I just feel like lying flat is more suitable. Trying hard is useless in this situation." (Interviewee 003)

The mentality of "working for a day is just a day" has become their common state of mind. With the internalization of such negative attitudes, laborers in daily wage jobs feel bored and disgusted. They lose motivation for life and work, feeling aimless and lacking in pursuit. They often fall into self-doubt and denial, discontent with their current situation but unwilling and unable to make changes. At this point, "lying flat" serves as a psychological comfort for them. They attempt to reduce self-expectations through this passive "giving up," numbing themselves to the precarity of the daily wage labor system.

### 5.2.2 Frequent job changes

In studies of employment strategies for the new generation of migrant workers, the frequent job changes among migrant workers are often mentioned. As migrant workers move to cities, they attempt to transcend their original status as farmers and adapt to their new identity[38]. Therefore, frequent job changes constitute an important behavior for new generation migrant workers to adjust to the economic and social demands of urban life[28]. In addition to the relatively obvious positive or negative attitudes within the daily wage labor system, some of the daily wage workers hold a more moderate attitude towards the precarity of the daily wage labor system, and they do not reject the existence of precarity, and they may try to improve their own living conditions through the destabilizing behaviors of changing jobs frequently. A common principle behind the practice of changing between jobs is driven by wages. During the off-season in the daily wage market, daily wage workers may choose to temporarily abandon the limited job resources available in the market and try to apply for relatively stable positions such as security or janitorial roles in formal companies to compensate for the income precarity brought about by the off-season. However, since these job changes are generally motivated by wage considerations, when the daily wage market regains vitality, daily wage workers will again decide whether to stay or leave based on the prices offered by both types of work.

"Because winter is approaching and it's close to the Chinese New Year, there are fewer job openings in the market. Sometimes we have to wait for a few days without any work. So, I'd rather switch to another option, like working as a janitor in a company, which is more stable... When spring comes, I'll go wherever the wages are higher, regardless of the type of work." (Interviewee 015)

Another strategy for changing jobs is to do both daily wage work and other work at the same time. For example, Interviewee 019 flexibly alternates between agricultural farming at home and seeking daily wage work outside: when the farm work at home becomes busy, he invests more time in agricultural farming; however, when he feels excessively confined and tired from farming at home, he chooses to seek daily wage work outside to balance his life. Shifting focus between these two types of work not only ensures relatively stable income but also allows for a varied and flexible lifestyle pursuit.

"If I feel too exhausted from work at home, I'll do more daily wage work outside, but I still need to do some work at home. Although agriculture may not be a highly profitable industry, it's a legitimate one. You need something practical and stable to do. If I only do daily wage work all the time, I'm not sure how much I can earn." (Interviewee 019)

## **6 DISCUSSION**

Under the development of the market economy and social transformation, the system of daily wage labor has undergone rapid expansion. While it offers migrant workers more diverse and flexible work opportunities, the issue of labor precarity also demands attention. Compared to other informal employment, the daily wage system provides greater flexibility and freedom, but the sporadic and variable nature of the work exacerbates the occurrence of labor precarity.

Based on empirical research on the labor precarity of daily wage workers, this study finds that their precarity is concentrated in four aspects: labor opportunities, working conditions, wages payments, and labor security. Firstly, the fluctuation of demand for daily wage labor positions across seasons, coupled with intermediaries monopolizing job resources, forces daily wage workers to spend a considerable amount of time waiting for employment opportunities in labor markets, directly resulting as precarity in job opportunities. Secondly, the high intensity and poor working environments of daily wage labor cause significant stress for workers. Thirdly, in terms of wage payments, the phenomenon of labor contractors taking advantage of their hegemony to deceive and withhold wages from workers is frequent, while subcontracting and intermediary fees further lead to wage deductions for daily wage workers. Finally, daily wage labor lacks insurance coverage and legal protections, and most workers have limited education levels, leading to poor awareness and ability to assert their rights, consequently exacerbating the risks for daily wage workers. Overall, labor precarity is amplified within the daily wage system, presenting characteristics of "hyper-precarity," making livelihoods difficult for daily wage workers.

In the face of such labor precarity, daily wage workers don't necessarily adopt a wholly negative outlook. Research indicates that they employ flexible coping strategies through two approaches: "stabilizing actions" and "destabilizing actions." "Stabilizing actions" involve individual efforts by daily wage workers to enhance their own labor stability. This includes improving self-protection measures in terms of safety, building social networks, and enhancing personal skills. Additionally, they may attempt negotiation or resistance, or opt to exit the daily wage labor system by returning to their hometowns or seeking formal employment to avoid precarity risks. "Destabilizing actions," on the other hand, involve actions by daily wage workers that may reduce their life stability but help them adapt to their circumstances. This could include adopting a "lying flat" mentality to lower personal expectations or frequently changing jobs to increase income.

It's noteworthy that the "stabilizing" and "destabilizing" actions of daily wage workers have, to some extent, alleviated the "hyper-precarity" of their labor or mitigated their discomfort within the daily wage labor system. However, these actions cannot completely alter their life circumstances; their future remains shrouded in uncertainty.

The efforts of daily wage workers to enhance their skills and negotiate wages with employers are still controlled by the daily wage system. The precarity of labor cannot be completely eradicated. Currently, due to the lack of widespread legal contracts in the daily wage labor market, the attempts of daily wage workers to assert their rights often yield no results. Moreover, those who choose to adopt a "lying flat" mentality may not only find themselves in situations where their income sources cannot sustain their livelihoods but also risk the erosion of their sense of labor significance, thus posing obstacles to labor transformation[26]. Furthermore, the constant switching of jobs is not an ideal strategy. On one hand, frequent changes between different jobs may lead to frequent fluctuations in social networks, hindering daily wage workers from establishing a sense of belonging and causing them to become "wanderers" floating within the city. On the other hand, job changes also impose limitations on labor skill development, resulting in an "inverted U-shaped" trajectory in individual development[38], which is detrimental to the improvement of wage levels and employment quality[39].

Under the daily wage system, informal labor relations are not the sole factors leading to the precarious situation of daily wage workers. We also need to pay attention to the influence of the attitudes and actions of daily wage workers on their livelihoods. Therefore, to effectively address the precarious situation of daily wage workers, it is necessary to understand their diverse survival challenges and subjective needs. Comprehensive and proactive considerations should be made from the perspectives of institutional design, regulatory services, and social governance to explore possible pathways to alleviate the precarity of daily wage labor.

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