

# GIG ECONOMY IN CHINA: THE MOTIVATION AND CHALLENGES OF CHINESE DISPATCHED WORKERS

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**Abstract:** Atypical job is prevalent worldwide. Since the initiation of economic reforms in China four decades ago, dispatched workers have emerged as a substantial segment of its labour force market. Despite China's established regulatory framework for governing the labor dispatch market, the past decade has seen occurrences of inequitable treatment of dispatched workers. More attention has also been piqued over the motivation of some Chinese people opt to become dispatched workers instead of full-time employees.

The author randomly distributed an online questionnaire to 150 Chinese dispatched workers who worked for W factory (based in Shanghai, China) and administered follow-up interviews with 20 of 150 them for more details. The present state of dispatched workers in China, indicating that engagement in the gig economy is a rational avenue for the unemployed or those with inadequate income from conventional employment were been elucidated. The challenges occurred in these Chinese dispatched workers, as well as their incentives for becoming such workers were concluded.

**Keywords:** Gig economy; Chinese dispatched workers; Qualitative research

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary business landscape, technology is progressively supplanting traditional methods of operation in pursuit of profit within an increasingly competitive arena, hence loosening the formerly controlled and regulated framework of formal employment prospects. The swift integration of technologies and evolving candidate preferences enable individuals to discover additional employment opportunities, while firms may access applicants possessing requisite capabilities. In recent years, digital platforms that support on-demand (or 'gig') work have grown enormously and across an expanding range of industries and geographies [1]. The gig economy is a resultant phenomenon. The 'gig economy' refers to markets in short-term, on-demand, occasional, and typically task-based labour. Originating in the music industry, the term 'gig' is increasingly used to describe work in a much wider range of industries, including food and beverages, transport, education, and many more [1]. It refers to an economic model characterized by the employment of temporary or freelance workers to undertake tasks within the service sector.

Contemporary firms are facilitating the expansion of the gig economy by linking workers to consumers with increased speed and efficiency. The kind of work that is offered is contingent: casual and non-permanent work. It may have variable hours and little job security, involve payment on a piece-work basis, and lack any options for career development [2]. Engaging in the gig economy presents millions in China with the possibility to adopt a fundamentally distinct approach to employment compared to conventional methods. The emergence of the 'gig economy' epitomizes the transformation of the labour landscape. The word denotes the rise of short-term contracts in lieu of permanent or steady employment. It has been praised by many for providing far greater flexibility for workers, companies, and customers, in contrast to the restrictive nature of certain traditional employment contracts. Employers also have the discretion to determine the timing and method of hiring employees.

The emergence of the gig economy has introduced new opportunities and challenges for work relations. Although the absolute number of workers in the gig economy remains relatively small, there is concern among the public and policy makers in high-income countries regarding its implications for the future of work [3]. A multitude of scholars, and current or former gig workers have expressed apprehensions regarding the potential adverse consequences of the commercial and labor practices of platform businesses. Concerns exist over the resurgence of 'spot labor markets,' which were prevalent in agricultural and manufacturing sectors during periods of elevated unemployment and are now re-emerging in the digital economy. In most countries, a standard (or core) model of employment relationship (i.e. full-time work under an open-ended employment contract) typically receives the greatest labour and social security protection, with divergent work arrangements receiving less protection in correlation to the magnitude of the differences between the former and the latter [4]. Contemporary nervous and disenfranchised workers anticipate the emergence of the next 'job' on a smartphone, rather than awaiting opportunities at the company or factory entrance.

The modern era has significantly transformed all facets of life, including job practices. Consequently, online consumer-oriented services, complimentary communication platforms, and international networks have expanded opportunities for outsourcing, contracting, recruitment, and freelancing more than ever before. The gig economy is characterized by facilitating transactions between customers and clients via a platform. It is also referred to "crowd-sourcing". Crowd-sourcing has become established in various business fields since crowds can solve certain problems faster, better, and cheaper than companies are able to in house.<sup>1</sup> Today, 84% of the world's most prestigious companies—including SAP, Dell, Google, General Electric, Fiat, LEGO, and Procter & Gamble—have started to build

their own crowd-sourcing platforms [5]. The gig economy is also characterized by workers who engage in flexible work arrangements dictated by service demand, self-sourcing employment, tasks executed via online platforms, and a triangular connection including the worker, end user, and digital intermediary.

Part-time positions, job sharing, contractual and freelance roles, temporary employment, self-employment, and novel career opportunities. The gig economy is a labor market characterized by freelancing or part-time employment, in contrast to full-time contracts. Rapidly expanding sectors of the gig economy are found throughout the creative and knowledge-intensive industries. Growth in online platform participation is highly dependent on attracting new participants or increasing engagement of existing participants. As outside options improve, recruiting and retaining platform workers might become increasingly difficult and could constrain future growth [6]. But the platform has afforded workers unprecedented chances for access and competition in the global labor market, enabling them to work from any location at any time, provided they have access to computers and the Internet. Utilizing the online platform enables organizations to access specialist expertise more broadly, streamline hiring processes with greater flexibility and speed, and maintain production around the clock.

To date, the prevalence of atypical or nonstandard employment globally has raised two principal concerns: the marginalization of non-regular workers regarding employment conditions and the question of whether non-regular workers should be recognized as a fundamental part of the labour force. The defining characteristic of gig economy businesses is that they offer online applications to connect individuals seeking services with those providing services, and do not consider themselves to be service providers. Unlike typical independent contractors, however, workers cannot negotiate their rates or work contracts, but must electronically accept the platform's terms in order to access assignments [7]. The investigation into the marginalization of non-regular workers arises from concerns regarding the sufficiency of protections for their rights and interests. So this study aims to examine the challenges and motivation of dispatched workers in the gig economy. Atypical employment is seen with scepticism or disapproval as a possible avenue for labour exploitation. The examination of the normalization of the non-regular workforce illustrates the growing prevalence of a flexible and inclusive labour force. Despite originating from divergent viewpoints, these two groups share a common concern regarding the existence of an effective regulatory framework for safeguarding both regular and non-regular workers, promoting nonstandard employment, and managing the labour market.

Labour dispatch, sometimes known as temporary agency work or labour hire in certain countries, is a nonstandard kind of employment that has been in existence for decades. The development of labor dispatch in China is shaped by the intertwined dynamics of precarization and dualization, with the state playing a predominant role in uneven regulation and institutionalized dualism [8]. Labour dispatch is an employment arrangement that involves three parties: the labour-dispatch entity, the labour-service user, and the dispatch worker. This tripartite relationship engenders numerous policy considerations and legal issues, including the regulation of the labour-dispatch industry, the employment conditions of dispatched workers, the job security of regular employees, the sustainability of enterprises, and the respective liabilities of the labour-dispatch entity and the labour-service user.

In China, following two decades of economic reforms, labour dispatch has become a prominent feature of the labour market. In this context, we conducted an online questionnaire for 150 workers, and followed-up interviews on the experiences of 20 workers of 150 workers for more detailed information. The study seeks to determine the factors that influenced workers to choose W factory as their workplace and addressed the challenges they met during working life. The initial section below delineates the current status of labour dispatch in China based on related literature.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the late 1975s, China initiated economic reforms and embraced globalization. The economic reforms and opening policies resulted in several labour changes, notably the implementation of labour dispatch in China. The state began to experiment with labor contracts in Shenzhen, one of the forerunner SEZs, in the context of joint ventures as it was aware that foreigner investors might run into difficulty hiring workers under the then existing socialist recruitment practice. It allowed joint ventures to stipulate terms governing the employment, dismissal, and resignation of workers in labor contracts. The labor contract program was successful and was replicated in other coastal and regional areas [9]. So the labour dispatch was employed in two instances. Chinese workers were deployed abroad to work for foreign companies or organizations under 'foreign labour cooperation'. Internally, dispatch personnel were assigned to meet the staffing requirements of foreign firms or representative offices in China. But numerous Chinese state-owned firms operated inefficiently and had amassed a significant number of surplus employees, prompting the need for rationalization efforts.

In the 1990s, China initiated the reform of state-owned firms, resulting in the dismissal of a significant number of workers. In addition to motivating redundant workers to pursue entrepreneurial ventures, labour dispatch was advocated to generate job possibilities and address the issue of labour surplus. Prior to the initiation of economic reforms and trade liberalization nearly 40 years ago, China maintained policies that kept the economy very poor, stagnant, centrally controlled, vastly inefficient, and relatively isolated from the global economy. Since opening up to foreign trade and investment and implementing free-market reforms in 1979, China has been among the world's fastest-growing economies, with real annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaging 9.5% through 2018, a pace described by the World Bank as "the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history" [10]. As part of that gigantic process of "informalization" of urban employment, there came in the late 1990s and early 2000s also the massive privatization of small- and medium-scale SOEs, under the strategic policy of "grasp the big and let go of the small" [11]. Labour

dispatch allowed state-owned firms to maintain essential employees while outsourcing ancillary tasks to sent labour. In the 2000s, the expansion of labour dispatch intensified due to societal and organizational causes. The proliferation of private firms encouraged by the government, and a significant influx of rural workers into metropolitan regions. The core concept is that “dispatch work is generally temporary, supplementary, or substitute work,” which is sharply distinguished from regular, long-term labor. The law characterizes dispatch work as a “dispatch work relationship” [11]. On the other hand, enterprises selected labour dispatch to reduce labour costs by eliminating recruitment expenses; mitigate employment-related risks and liabilities; facilitate flexible adjustments to workforce size according to operational demands; and circumvent recruitment constraints while managing overall wage expenditures. Moreover, some opted to serve as dispatch workers, with some seeking to gain work experience for future endeavors, while others aspired to transition into permanent positions. In 2007, China promulgated the Labor Contract Law to deal with the defects of the 1995 Labor Law. The LCL contained numerous progressive provisions that discomforted many employers. Among the most controversial were the insistence on a written and signed employment contract and the hefty penalties for non-compliance with the formalities. If a contract remained unsigned after one year, an employer would be deemed to have entered into an open-term employment relationship with an employee. While the LCL allowed an employee to resign unilaterally upon proper notice, an employer did not have unfettered discretion to terminate an employee [9].

In recent years, formal reports and statistics about nationwide labour dispatch have been scarce. The present state of labour dispatch in China is primarily determined by unofficial sources. Following the improvement of the legal framework, the expansion of dispatch workers has varied, but the quantity of labour-dispatch businesses has consistently increased. Furthermore, because to the proliferation of the Internet, numerous human resource companies or platforms utilize their websites to advertise labour dispatch services and to recruit dispatch workers. The joint employer doctrine sanctions enterprises that externalize liabilities onto third parties while benefiting from the fruit of dispatch workers’ hard work. It is a broader and fuller conceptualization of the employment relationship found in a labor dispatch arrangement [9]. Consequently, labour dispatch in China exhibits considerable diversity, contingent upon the staffing requirements of labor-service clients and the duration for which dispatched workers are needed. Dispatch workers typically comprise rural individuals migrating to urban areas, unemployed individuals, and graduates from vocational institutions or junior colleges who struggle to obtain stable employment. Nonetheless, it has been stated that experts have been assigned to occupy senior positions. Consequently, labour dispatch constitutes a notable form of unconventional work in China.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is predominantly founded on an online questionnaire consisting of 12 questions administered to 150 Chinese workers at W factory, owing to its simplicity and cost-effectiveness, and in-depth interviews. Questionnaire surveys are a popular data collection method for academic or marketing research in a variety of fields. An online survey questionnaire survey follows the same characteristics as the paper version of the survey. However, the data collection strategies have specific characteristics (e.g. technological, demographic, response rate) that affect their design and implementation [12].

The online questionnaire were addressed as the following parts:

- (1) What is your gender?
- (2) What is your age?
- (3) What is your educational background?
- (4) What are your working hours per day?
- (5) From which city in China do you originate?
- (6) What was your method for obtaining employment at W factory?
- (7) What motivates your decision to work at the W factory rather than at other factories?
- (8) What is the biggest challenge during working here?
- (9) What’s your monthly salary?
- (10) Have you executed a labour contract?
- (11) Is this your first job? Have you previously worked in a comparable industry?
- (12) Are you willing to participating in a one-on-one interview?

Subsequent in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 of 148 workers (2 of 150 workers refused to be interviewed) to obtain more comprehensive data. Semi-structured interviews are superbly suited for a number of valuable tasks, particularly when more than a few of the open-ended questions require follow-up queries [13]. Through interviews, these workers can share their experiences with the author who gather, examine, and assess data and information for their studies and study topics. During interview sessions, participants are free to express their ideas, narratives, comprehensions, viewpoints, and opinions in line with the research topics, interview questions, and social context. To allow participants to openly express their opinions without external interference.

The researcher may ask private interview questions during one-on-one meetings. Occasionally, certain individuals may necessitate more time and space to articulate their perspectives without excluding crucial details. Consequently, researchers would cultivate a rapport with participants, enabling the acquisition of more profound insights and narratives. Consequently, the researcher opted to conduct two interviews with each participant to provide them with greater opportunity to express their perspectives.

The 20 participants who were conducted interviews were asked two semi-structured sessions:

(1) What makes you work in W factory?

(2) How do you describe your working life in W factory? What is your biggest challenge? Could you please give me more details about it?

The interviews lasted between 52 and 144 minutes to address the research question. The identities of these 20 participants were initialed P1, P2, P3, P4,... P20 to preserve their privacy. Upon the completion of two interviews per participant, the researcher integrated the qualitative data gathered from each individual. The researcher would provide interview transcripts to each participant for evaluation. This interview format is advantageous as participants can review and revisit their own inputs and information. All participants were allowed to append and modify their contributions, omissions, and narratives during the review phase. Thus, the verification process is beneficial for confirming the precision of the participant data. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher documented participant dialogues with a digital recorder. All parties concerned acknowledged this agreement. Nevertheless, they all decline to reveal their identities or contact details for privacy and specific reasons.

Upon reviewing the risk statement and consent form, the participants comprehended that their involvement in the study was optional. Participants may opt out of involvement. No penalties exist for departing from the interviews at any moment. To safeguard participants' privacy, all pertinent materials and data will be eliminated six months following the study's completion. Privacy is the paramount consideration in our inquiry. The finalized consent forms, written transcripts, personal data, contact details, addresses, and computer-related materials were consequently housed in a password-protected cabinet. Access to the resources was restricted solely to the researcher.

The participants who completed the online questionnaire were randomly selected, while the sampling strategy for in-depth interviews was purposive. The primary objectives of purposive interviews were to achieve a rough gender balance among workers and to incorporate diverse perspectives on their working lives, thereby facilitating the acquisition of more detailed and comprehensive information. The data of questionnaire collection and organized were from January to April 2024, and the interviews were conducted from May to June 2024. Qualitative work is expressed in natural language, whereas quantitative work is expressed in numbers and in statistical models. Qualitative work employs small samples, whereas quantitative work is based on large-N analysis. Qualitative work draws on cases chosen in an opportunistic or purposive fashion, whereas quantitative work employs systematic (random) sampling. Qualitative work is often focused on particular individuals, events, and contexts, lending itself to an idiographic style of analysis [14]. And all these qualitative data were coded from July to October, 2024.

The author recruited people by posting links on WECHAT, the most prevalent social media platform in China. The link description contained details regarding the study topic, addressed inquiries concerning informed consent, and emphasized that participation was voluntary and should not be perceived as employment. It was underscored that their personal information will be definitely protected.

Reimbursement will be provided for the valuable time of 150 workers, and participants who complete the online questionnaire will get 10 YUAN as a mark of appreciation, with an additional 50 YUAN for those willing to participate in interviews. A rapport and trust were established with the participants prior to the completion of the questionnaire and the interviews to ensure they honestly regarded the interview context as research involvement rather than a paid work.

## 4 KEY FINDINGS

The research sample had 150 respondents, subsequent to the collection of the surveys, we conducted a data analysis as outlined below.

### 4.1 What is Your Gender (Table 1)

**Table 1** Gender

Male	92	61.33%
Female	58	38.67%
Total	150	100%

### 4.2 What is Your Age (Table 2)

**Table 2** Age

20-24 years old	16	10.67%
25-33 years old	123	82%
34-40 years old	8	5.33%
41 years old or above	3	2%
Total	150	100%

### 4.3 What is Your Educational Background (Table 3)

**Table 3** Educational Background

Below Secondary	11	7.33%
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Vocational School Education Degree		
Secondary	45	30%
Vocational School Education Degree		
Three-Year College Education	82	54.67%
bachelor Degree or Above	12	8%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.4 What are Your Working Hours Per Day (Table 4)

**Table 4** Working Hours Per Day

Below 8 hours	12	8%
8 hours ~ 10 hours	64	42.66%
Above 10 hours	74	49.33%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.5 From Which City in China do You Originate (Table 5)

**Table 5** City in China

Jilin, Heilongjiang , Liaoning Province	62	41.33%
Others	35	23.337%
Guizhou Province	31	20.67%
Guangdong Province	22	14.67%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.6 What was Your Method for Obtaining Employment at W Factory (Table 6)

**Table 6** Method for Obtaining Employment at W Factory

Online Platforms	81	54%
Introduced by Friends	36	24%
Directly Employed by W Factory	33	22%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.7 What Motivates Your Decision to Work at the W Factory Rather than at Other Factories (Table 7)

**Table 7** Motivates Your Decision to Work at the W Factory Rather than at Other Factories

Flexibility and Autonomy	89	59.33%
Others	61	40.67%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.8 What is the Biggest Challenge during Working Here (Table 8)

**Table 8** The Biggest Challenge during Working Here

Salary Problems	64	42.67%
Accommodation Problems	22	14.66%
Over-Worked Problems	52	34.67%
Others	12	8%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.9 What's Your Monthly Salary (Table 9)

**Table 9** Monthly Salary

Below 3000 Yuan	41	27.33%
3000~5000 Yuan	86	57.34%
Above 5000 Yuan	23	15.33%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.10 Have you Executed a Labour Contract (Table 10)

**Table 10** Whether a Labour Contract has been Executed

No	132	88%
Yes	18	12%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.11 Is This Your First Job? Have You Previously Worked in a Comparable Industry (Table 11)

**Table 11** Whether This was the First Job

Yes	122	81.33%
No	28	18.67%
Total	150	100%

#### 4.12 Are you Willing to Participating in a One-on-One Interview (Table 12)

**Table 12** Whether People are Willing to Participating in a One-on-One Interview

Yes	148	98.67%
No	2	1.33%
Total	150	100%

Despite the 150 participants' diverse familial and educational backgrounds, varied cities of origin in China, and distinct majors, their motivations for selecting W factory as their workplace and the challenges they faced in their working lives yielded comparable outcomes. After coding all data of questionnaire and interviews, we have reached the conclusion. Their motives for selecting the W factory were delineated into two primary parts: flexibility, autonomy and inability to secure alternative employment.

## 5 FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY

89 of the 150 participants cited flexibility and autonomy, which were also frequently discussed in in-depth interviews. We explore flexibility in terms of worker ability to arrange the location and timing of their gigs to suit their preferences and other commitments [15]. The gig economy's effects on the temporal structures of work cannot be derived from technological possibilities alone, but are instead to be found in the concrete practices that its users adopt [16].

Clients and customers may capitalize on this flexibility: rapid meal delivery, on-demand site development, and taxi services have never been more accessible. Employees are purportedly able to select their tasks, methods, timing, location, and clientele. Numerous individuals can secure employment and income that were formerly difficult to attain. The rise of the gig economy raises issues for economic research and policy. For individual employers, gig employments provide more flexibility. Dispensing with long-term contracts and minimizing separation costs allows employers to adjust employment quickly to demand conditions [17]. The benefits of being a "flexi" worker include minimal entrance barriers, the capacity to achieve a personal equilibrium between professional and private life, adaptable working hours, selection of work types and projects, and the opportunity to work from any location globally. One participant stated this point well:

'...For my current job, I get paid 10 RMB per hour on a daily basis. When I need money, I work. I work two other day jobs as well. I also have two young kids. I look after the kids the rest of the time and work around 14 to 18 days a month. I opted to work at W factory since my husband also works there and the most important is that we can choose our own working hours...' (Participant #3)

Through deeper conversation with those participants who are attracted by flexibility and autonomy, we determined that 48 out of 89 participants are women, indicating that 82.76 percent of female participants consider flexibility as a primary motivation. There is an assumption that flexibility is an important feature offered by gig work, and that this is particularly relevant to women [15]. Another participant noted that:

'...I'm divorced and have three kids. I am responsible for taking my kids to and from school. I can't afford a babysitter. I'm only able to work at night. I sleep for barely five hours every day. I am unable to care for my kids if my employment starts at nine and ends at five. I really enjoy this type of work in W factory where I get to pick my own hours of working. Perhaps it's because I have no other options...' (Participant #5)

Because of the flexibility, employees can schedule their engagements to fit their obligations and preferences. The impact of the gig economy on work arrangements is determined by user behaviour as well as technology advancements. 48 of the 89 participants in the survey are female, and 82.76 percent of them cited flexibility as their top incentive. Women especially benefit from this flexibility because they can work at night and are in charge of childcare.

## 6 INABILITY TO SECURE ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT

61 of the 150 participants cited inability to secure alternative employment, which were also discussed in in-depth interviews. Little is known about how job seekers downplay their age, attempt to compensate for perceived age-related deficiencies, or otherwise try to avoid age-related bias when searching for a job [18]. Only three of the 150 randomly chosen participants were older than 41, while 123 were between the ages of 25 and 33, 16 were between the ages of 20 and 24, and 8 were between the ages of 33 and 40. Eighty-two percent of these dispatched workers were relatively young, this implies that the majority of them lack work experience or are just graduates and struggling financially. Two participants noted that:

'...I recently received my bachelor's degree from university. I failed the postgraduate course I had intended to enrol in. I

no longer receive financial support from my family. I had intended to look for work, but I got no feedback even though I have submitted numerous resumes. For now, I am only able to come here and work to make ends meet. I'm still studying for other tests, and I'll quit right away if I find another work...' (Participant #4)

'...I wish to take the civil service exam, and I graduated from college three years ago. For now, I passed the written test but failed the interview after failing the previous two times. I think I can give it another go, but I need money. In the hopes of passing the test the following time, I will work at night and study during the day...' (Participant #13)

The relative education hypothesis posits that when college degrees are rare, individuals with more education have less competition to enter highly-skilled occupations. When college degrees are more common, there may not be enough highly-skilled jobs to go around; some college-educated workers lose out to others and are pushed into less-skilled jobs. Under either scenario, college-educated job seekers would increasingly find worse jobs and have lower incomes because the population of college educated job-seekers has become less desirable [19]. Not even to mention that, only 12 of the 150 randomly chosen participants hold the bachelor diploma or above, while 82 of 150 these workers, most of them, just received three-year college education, 45 of them hold the secondary vocational school education degree and 11 of them even hold below secondary vocational school education degree. Notwithstanding the increasing prevalence of gig-based employment, the majority of colleges have not implemented substantial modifications to their courses to accommodate this emerging trend. This implies that numerous students will graduate lacking the requisite expertise to progress, as their future employment will encompass a growing array of jobs. It indicates that job seekers with minimal educational attainment possess fewer professional opportunities, diminished confidence, and restricted capabilities. Consequently, W factory characterized by relatively low entrance barriers and uncomplicated job are particularly well-suited for this part of job seekers, and coincidentally, majority of them. A large body of research shows that academic success is strongly associated with family background. Other studies demonstrate how the hiring process after college contains persistent class elements. Research on job search and hiring processes has documented the importance of social networks for finding a job, and has shown how higher-status groups have better access to those kinds of networks [20]. And 62 of them came from Jilin, Heilongjiang, Liaoning province, 31 of them from Guizhou province, 22 of them from Guangdong province, while 35 of them from other cities. It could be seen that most of these workers came from less developed cities in China and were not well-educated. All these data implies that the majority of them lack the ability to do the "decent job". Two other participants stated that:

'...When I was a kid, I struggled to focus and never enjoyed doing homework. However, I discovered that practically every job posted required a bachelor's degree or higher once I graduated from three-year college. There was nothing I could do. The work was easy and didn't need much thought, and the W factory didn't require a bachelor's degree. For me at least, this work was ideal...' (Participant #6)

'...It was a friend who recommended me. I failed the internship each time I tried to locate a job on my own. There is no internship time at W Factory, and I make enough money to cover my expenditures, to me....at least...' (Participant #12)

To sum up, flexibility, autonomy and inability to secure alternative employment were two main motives of these dispatched workers.

Nonetheless, akin to all endeavors, the choice to engage in gig economy entails specific benefits as well as drawbacks. The drawbacks of participating in W factory were categorized into five segments: insufficiency and inequality of income, unstable income, hours of work, residential conditions, social security and job insecurity. After data-coding, 64 out of 150 these workers who were concerned about their income were divided into two categories: insufficiency and inequality of income and unstable income. Out of 150 workers, 52 cited overwork as the main issue they faced at W Factory. Residential conditions are regarded by 22 out of 150 workers as the largest obstacle. Twelve of them take into account additional difficulties, including absence of pension, social and health insurance, inability to receive sick leave or annual leave, limited job security regarding terminations or notice periods, which we got more information through in-depth interviews and all these data were determined to be social security and job insecurity.

## 7 INSUFFICIENCY AND INEQUALITY OF INCOME

The principal challenge encountered by dispatched labour is insufficient income and disparity relative to full-time employees. Economically, insufficient disposable income for the majority of the population could dampen domestic consumption and economic growth prospects [21]. After analyzing the questionnaire we collected, only 15.33 percent of these dispatched workers were able to make more than 5000 Yuan (about 714 USD) per month, while 27.33 percent made less than 3000 Yuan (roughly 428 USD) per month, and 57.34 percent made between 3000 and 5000 Yuan (roughly 428 to 714 USD) per month.

Of the insufficiency of income, one participant noted that:

'...The wage is extremely inadequate...I am 42 years old, my health has deteriorated, and I am unable to work for extended periods of time like I was young... I only make around 3,000 RMB a month now. I only receive roughly 2,500 RMB a month since I have to pay an additional 500 RMB to live in the W factory-provided dormitory. The W factory only offers lunch, therefore I have to spend more for eating. Even if life is really tough, I dare not quit this job because it is so hard to obtain a work at my age...' (Participant #18)

Politically, the unequal income distribution could lead to social instability. As such, making wealth distribution more equitable is not only an economic issue but also an important political task [21]. Full-time employees are individuals who have signed a contract. Of the 150 participants, only 18 employees have executed a labour contract, and not surprisingly, all their incomes exceed 5,000 Yuan. The differences in hourly wages are significantly more evident. To

mitigate the disparity in real earnings, some dispatched workers even agreed to longer working hours to compensate for the inequalities. Two other participants stated that:

'...My friend, who has a contract, recommended W Factory to me. We made rather different salaries. In addition to accommodation and lunch, five different insurances, and a housing fund, he can still make 6,000 Yuan per month. However, my monthly income is barely around 3,000 yuan. My working hours are comparable to his, more than him sometimes. And I would need to work at least 16 hours a day, which is unachievable, if I wanted to make the same amount of money as him. I can't do anything about it, but I feel like it's really unequal. I've previously offered to sign a contract, but my proposal was turned down due to my education background. According to the manager in W factory, a lot of people are interested in applying for this job, and even if I don't, a lot of people will still do it. Therefore, I guess I have no power to address the injustice...' (Participant #1)

'...I did introduce one of my friend to work in W Factory. She launched her own restaurant after graduating from three-year college, but it didn't work out. She can't even afford food during that time. There is nothing I can do about the wage difference because her education level is insufficient...' (Participant #9)

## 8 UNSTABLE INCOME

The second issue encountered by dispatched workers is unstable income. Due to their low income and considerable income inequality, salary payment unpredictability exacerbates their difficulties more. Due to the attributes of the Chinese economy, dispatched workers in China opt to engage in platforms as a preferred secondary income source or as a primary income supplemented by sporadic offline employment. the sole source of money they produce. However, dispatched workers frequently did not get their wages on time due to insufficient protection of their rights. The government acknowledged that wage shortfalls could precipitate social upheaval. Income instability primarily results from employment uncertainty, which will be further upon thereafter. One participant noted that:

'...A labour contract was not signed by me. I got paid by the hour, so it was that the longer I worked, the more I made. The main issue, though, was how inconsistently the wage was paid. My wage fluctuated between once a month, every three months, and sometimes every six months. The only advantage working in W factory was that at least I had food and a place to live. Even if I report the untimely paid stuff to the police, nobody would care because I didn't sign a contract, and I might get fired...' (Participant #20)

## 9 HOURS OF WORK

The majority of dispatched workers have longer working hours than full-time workers, and more working days per week. Critically, workers' level of agency and their ability to choose how to allocate their time in practice dictate whether flexibility is desirable or empowering, though there are also concerns that greater working-time autonomy may lead to an intensification of work and overtime [15]. According to the questionnaire, 8 percent of these workers work fewer than 8 hours per day, 42.67 percent work between 8 and 10 hours per day, and 49.33 percent work more than 10 hours per day.

'...I could make roughly 5,000 yuan a month even if I didn't sign a labour contract. I got up and worked for almost twelve hours every day. I was simply physically exhausted because the work was not cognitively taxing. I worked twelve hours a day to increase my income, but I had no personal life. I seemed to live for my work...' (Participant #17)

'...I agreed to work eight hours a day and receive a predetermined monthly pay when I signed the contract. I was frequently requested to "voluntarily work overtime," nevertheless. Basically, everyone even those who signed labor contract like me will have to overwork. We were told that we have the 'right to decline', but we would receive criticism if we didn't do what they told us to do. People frequently put in 10 hours a day at work. Everyone was doing it, even if I didn't like it. I couldn't do anything about it...' (Participant #8)

## 10 RESIDENTIAL CONDITIONS

The residential conditions for these workers were not good as well. The majority of them reside in dormitories supplied by their employers at W factory construction sites. We were told that these residences are overcrowded and deficient in essential furnishings, sanitation amenities, heating, and air conditioning.

'...I live in the W factory-provided dormitory and pay 500 RMB a month for accommodation because the rent in Shanghai is so expensive that my wage is insufficient to support it...We are a dorm only for girls, and there are sixteen bunk beds here. In the summer, there are only four electric fans, no tables, two chairs and no air conditioning for sure... There is even nowhere to hang clothes because the space is so tiny. The entire building owns only one washing machine. I have to do my own laundry by my hands. In the summer, it's fine, but in the winter, doing laundry is extremely cold ...' (Participant #7)

'...I live in the dorm of W factory as well. Ten of us men share a single room. There are simply two electric fans and no air conditioning... The room is somewhat tiny, however there is a balcony for cloth hanging...' (Participant #14)

'...Ten people shared a tiny room, I have no privacy at all. making the accommodations quite subpar. There was no private washing rooms, the process of hitting the loo were open to the public, and each room's soundproofing was terrible. A good night's sleep was basically impossible. I find it incomprehensible that such accommodations cost 500 yuan a month...' (Participant #15)



## 11 SOCIAL SECURITY

Full-time employees are entitled to social security benefits, including a pension, unemployment insurance, health insurance, and subsidized public housing. But do dispatched workers receive equivalent social protection? Only 12 percent of the dispatched workers possessed signed labour contracts, but the remaining 88 percent did not. The issue of inadequate social protection for these workers mostly stems from discriminatory institutional frameworks that do not mandate businesses to offer social security to migrant workers.

'...I have not signed a labour contract. Upon commencing this position, I was presented with a contract to sign; however, I was informed privately that should I choose not to sign and give up the five social insurances and housing fund, I would receive an additional 1,000 yuan a month in base salary. I perceived such insurances as largely ineffective, and if I refrained from signing the contract, I could receive an additional 1,000 yuan; hence, it seemed prudent to pursue that option...' (Participant #11)

'...I didn't sign labor contract, and i have been employed here for a year. It's quite exhausting. My eyes have been giving me a lot of trouble lately, and I frequently make mistakes at work. I need health insurance in order to visit the doctor, which is something I want to do. I haven't paid for this insurance because I haven't signed a contract, but I can't pay all the treatment on my own. Even though my vision is becoming fuzzy, I feel like I can wait a little while longer before I have to borrow money to see a doctor...' (Participant #16)

## 12 JOB INSECURITY

Dispatched workers typically exhibit a low unemployment rate, partly because they cannot sustain prolonged unemployment. Nevertheless, a low unemployment rate does not imply poor job mobility for dispatched workers. Conversely, their career mobility far exceeds that of full-time workers. The elevated job mobility of these people is partially attributable to their concentration in the unskilled labour market, where competition for employment is significantly robust, perhaps due to their incomplete understanding of the nature of their occupations.

According to the survey, 81.33 percent of the workers at W factory are not employed in their initial position. Fifty-four percent were recruited via online employment platforms, twenty-four percent were referred by friends, and only twenty-two percent were directly employed by W factory. We can see that the majority of individuals are employed in W factory via internet networks. The absence of physical barriers in the digital realm enables clients to access workforce at any time. While online labour dispatch platforms frequently identify themselves as middlemen, they effectively undertake certain employer functions.

Another facet of job insecurity is that only a little fraction of dispatched workers own written contracts with their employers: dispatched workers typically find themselves in a vulnerable situation regarding salary payment issues in the absence of formal contracts.

'...I didn't sign labor contract. I'm afraid to make a mistake at work because I could be fired at any time with no pay...' (Participant #2)

'...I've never had a job that lasted longer than three months before this one. I've been here for four months, though, and I don't see why there should be a contract. I can leave whenever I want...' (Participant #10)

'...I fell very insecure about this job. If I don't work hard, I think I'll get fired. The people who work with me switch from one group to another. People leave because their accommodation isn't good or because they have to work too many hours. It's hard, but at least I can make money. Having a contract would be better for me; that way I'll be safer...' (Participant #19)

## 13 CONCLUSION

In contrast to conventional full-time employment, where job are allocated to workers, dispatched workers, or gig workers, possess enhanced autonomy about the nature of the work they select. Individuals engage in the gig economy due to flexibility and autonomy, inability to secure alternative employment. The challenges they met were mainly classified into six parts, insufficiency and inequality of income, unstable income, hours of work, residential conditions, social security and job insecurity.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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