

Are takeaway workers being exploited in China?

Abstract

It is argued that workers in the Chinese takeaway industry are exploited and treated unfairly by their employers. Since 2016, with the bloom of the gig economy, more and more workers enter and work in the takeaway industry in China. This essay is interested in the work experience of these workers, and aims to investigate this from the following three perspectives a) working hours b) personal life c) family life. Methodology adopted was semi-structured interviews. The major findings of this study are a) the flexibility of the working hours is the main motivation to enter the takeaway industry, b) participants were of moderate satisfied of being a takeaway worker and c) all participants believed their income was positively correlated to their labour, d) and they thought this mechanism was fair. The researcher identifies in the study that, most workers' rights and safety are not being fully protected, and thus risk being exploited. It is proposed that considering the great number of individuals and that it is predicted that more will enter the gig economy, legislations should be enacted to protect these workers, albeit the gig economy and digital economy are new phenomena.

Methodology

Difficulties of deciding methodology

The researcher faced a number of difficulties in the study, particularly in terms of getting access to the sample. The target population was takeaway workers - regardless of their gender, ethnicity, age, or the company they work for. Semi-structured interviews was the first approach that bumped into the researchers' mind, since it contained both open and closed questions which could generate quantitative data along with rich qualitative data.

It was observed in the pilot study that, nonetheless, most takeaway workers were in a hurry while they were working so in the very first place, so a face-to-face semi-structured was reckoned unrealistic. In addition, most of these takeaway workers were alerted and reluctant to participate in face-to-face interviews because of distrust of the researcher's identity, time and embarrassment. For example, a worker implied that a sociological interview was too 'grandeur' for a worker like him.

Later, the researcher attempted to gather information by using a questionnaire with a mix of open and closed questions (12 in total) and sent them to the takeaway workers via messages. The original plan was that the researcher ordered takeaway and got the telephone numbers of the target population, through which the researcher could send the questionnaire. In the first trail, the researcher sent the questionnaire to a total of 8 takeaway workers along with an instruction asking for their consent and the guarantee for confidentiality. It turned out, nevertheless, none of workers replied.

The researcher then turned to the Internet and past studies, hoping to find out some secondary sources of the working experiences of the takeaway workers. But most of these were were statistics, and reports about the workers' working experiences in China were rare.

Methodology

A woman that the researcher knew suggested that one of her previous friend were working in the takeaway industry. She asked the consent of this takeaway worker, who then agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview on phone.

With the knowledge the researcher then designed a semi-structured interview with some pre-determined closed (e.g. what's your age?) and open questions (e.g. why did you decide to enter the takeaway industry?). Other questions in the

interviews were based on the responses of the interviewer, which the researcher wished to investigate deeper and gathered more specific details.

The interviews followed ethical guidelines. A standardised instruction which asked for the informed consent and guaranteed anonymity, confidentiality and privacy was given to every participant at the beginning of the interview - this lasted for around 1 minute. Every interview was recorded for the sake of subsequent analysis and this was being consented by the participants. An interview transcript was produced. The researcher promised that the recordings would be deleted once the study was completed and she indeed did so.

The average time for each interview was 13.75 minutes, and the average number of question for each interview around 42 minutes.

Participants

Participants were 4 male takeaway workers, recruited using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. The first worker who participated was introduced by a friend of the researcher. The worker then introduced some of his colleagues to participate. Each subject was paid 20 Yuan for participation. The working geographic location for the subjects at the time of the research were in two of the most economically developed provinces in China (Guangzhou and Changsa - two capital cities of two economically developed provinces in southern China). The average age for the subjects was 30.5; the average disposable income is 4750 Yuan per month.

Aim

The study aimed to investigate the working experiences of the takeaway workers, and the researcher believed that the working experiences are affected by a range of factors other than simply wages, working hours and motivations. Therefore, in addition to these factors, the researcher also asked questions in these two aspects 1) personal life and 2) family life.

Pre-interview research showed that most takeaway workers were young people who once worked in manufacturing/farming industry in small towns and villages, where extended family and kinship networks flourish. It is thus significant to investigate the personal life and family of the subjects, and how these two aspects

interact and impact the working experiences of the workers came to the town to become takeaway workers and what motivated them to enter the takeaway industry.

Results and analysis

Location

The subjects were working cities in two of relatively economically developed provinces in China - Guangdong and Hunan - at the time of the interview.

Age

The subjects were relatively young, with an average age of 30.5 years old and being 18.5% younger than the average age of labour in China.¹

Income

According to the responds of the participants, their income is unstable, but higher than the average wage in China.

Every participant described their income per month was '*unstable*' and suggested that there was no basic income even though there was a contract - this was true for both full-time and part-time workers. All workers mentioned there was no basic income each month, even for full-time workers who had signed a contract with a company. The average disposable income of the subjects was 4750 Yuan per month and 57,000 Yuan per year. The average disposable income per month for takeaway workers was 34.6% higher than the national average disposable income per month.² The average money received for the subjects from each order was 3.8 Yuan.

All subjects said their income per month was proportional to their labour. One interviewer specially described this mechanism as 'If you worked harder, you more orders you got, and you'll probably get more money'. All participants had some complaints on the operation of the platform, but all said the principle i.e. the monthly income is positively correlated to their hard-work is fair, and believed that though the delivery fee for each order was low but their low income was because they could have worked harder.

¹ According to *Human Capital In China 2019* of the Central University of Finance and Economics, the average age of the working population in China (16-60 for male; 16-55 for female) was 37.8 years old.

² According to *the Statistical Yearbook by National Bureau of Statistics of China*, China's national average disposable income in 2019 was 3529.9 Yuan per month and 42358.9 Yuan per year.

Satisfaction on work

Workers gain moderate satisfaction from work. On average, the subjects rated their satisfaction for their working experiences as a takeaway worker 62 out of 100 points from two perspectives - income and workload.

All participants suggested their dissatisfaction came from the unfair and problematic operation of the platform or system, on which they were allocated orders from the customers. The issues included the lack of autonomy in accepting/turning down orders, the minimal reward they received from running each order, and pressure to please customers.

Income was another source of dissatisfaction. Workers believe they deserve higher income for their hard labour. One subject, who rated 3 out of 100 in the job satisfaction test said his income was far from what his aspiration - 10,000 Yuan per month.

Working Hours and Break Time

Working for long hours is the norm, though workers enjoy more break time and have more autonomy over when to take a break.

The average working hours for the takeaway workers was 9.9 hours, which was slightly higher (7.6%) than the average working hours (9.2 hours) in China. The working hours is operationalised as the time period during which the worker started working and ended work officially; these include the time when the takeaway worker was delivering an order for customers, waiting for orders and waiting for the restaurants to prepare and cook the meal for delivery.

The average break time of the sample was exactly 5 hours during various intervals in working hours per day; this was relatively long compared with jobs in other industries. The break time is operationalized as the time when the takeaway worker was not delivering an order for customers, not waiting for orders and not waiting for the restaurants to prepare and cook the meal for delivery, but the time when the worker can do any other activities upon his/her will. The break time (usually from 2 PM to 6:30 PM) tended to be in the afternoon and last for continuous hours rather than at fragmented intervals like white-collars. The break time thus existed in blocks rather in fragments and was pretty flexible. One subject described his break time as:

'Well, it depends. If I'm not too sleepy, I don't sleep. If I'm sleepy, I'll sleep for an hour, or even for two or three hours.'

For all participants, the working hours and break time were pretty flexible. Put it in their own words - 'It depends'. Interestingly, one subject who was a part-time takeaway worker and a part-time cook said:

'[As a delivery worker] I work when I want to work, and I can enjoy the holidays. I can go back to my hometown if there are any family affairs. You don't need to ask for leave permissions. It was hard to get a leave permission when I was a cook.

Whatever festivals, you name it, you cannot enjoy the holidays [when I was a cook]'
and

'I'm a cook when others ask me to be. And I'm not when nobody asks me'.

Data in a table

	Age (years old)	Disposable Income/month (Yuan)	Disposable Income/year (Yuan)	Satisfaction score (out of 100)	Money received from each order (Yuan)	Total break time during working hours (hours)	Total working hours per day (hours)
Sample 1	30	5500	66,000	80	1.5	5	8.5
Sample 2	37	4500	54,000	80	4.8	5	10.5
Sample 3	23	3500	72,000	85	4.3	4.5	11.5
Sample 4	32	5500	66,000	3	4.5	5.5	9.1
Average	30.5	4750	645,000	62	3.8	5	9.9

Conclusion

The working experience of a takeaway worker is distinct from traditional opinions on employees in cities (mostly white-collar employees) in China, where the workers should get up early, work for around 9-10 hours per day with little break time, and the workers need to work for free after dinner to show their loyalty to the company and commitment to 'success'. Compared with traditional white-collar employees, the working experiences seemed 'easier'. Their work is characterised by flexible working hours, relatively long break time, and the high autonomy on breaks and holidays.

Nevertheless, what should not be overlooked is that their income are unstable and the work loads are heavier than traditional white-collar jobs in cities. In addition, the researcher identified that the subjects may be potentially exploited by the company, who in most cases does not purchase an accident injury insurance for its employers during working hours and who forced the subjects to purchase appointed complementary and compulsory equipment (e.g. staff outfit, delivery boxes, helmets, etc.) with prices twice as high as the market price, according to the estimation of one subject. What worried the researcher was that workers were not aware of the exploitation, and even gave warrants to their submission

Although the flexibility of the working hours does harm the subjects, there are several benefits to the workers. The primary motivation for the workers to enter the takeaway industry was because it allows flexible working hours for both part-time and full-time workers. The platforms allow the workers to register with low barrier of entry, and collaborates with the workers by rewarding them with certain amount of fees each time they deliver an order successfully. The reasons for loving the flexibility, commented the subjects, were the freedom do leisure activities and deal with family affairs.

All participates entered the industry with the little expectations of gaining a high income. Even so they still wished to gain a much higher income than what they received at the time of the interview. The subjects attributed their low income to the technological issues of the platform and they are not hardworking enough.

Though annoyed by the platform constantly, the workers were all convinced that the principle of getting a reward - more reward if they work harder - is how the platform operated and that was quite fair. The subjects believed there was a positive correlation between income and hard work.

To conciliate the flexibility and freedom of working in the takeaway industry and protect the takeaway workers from exploitation, it is proposed that a legislation that specifies in the gig economy is needed and urgent.

Discussion

Overall, the study was quite ethical and generated rich both quantitative as well as qualitative data; it was, however, flawed. The sample was small and the sample technique was snowball sampling. Apart from the sampling technique, all subjects were male. The combination of these factors may make the sample biased and unrepresentative. From another perspective, however, the education as well as family background and the wide range of age may make the sample representative of the target population.

The study adopted both quantitative and qualitative measures, and generated rich data. The quantitative data showed the characteristics of the subjects and reflected their working experiences objectively. The qualitative data revealed the underlying reasons and motivations in terms of why the workers enter the industry, therefore compensating for the flaws of the quantitative measures.

However, it is worth noting that the qualitative measure was limited in some respects too. Firstly, the analysis of the qualitative data might be subjective, and consequently the inter-rater reliability may be low. The use of qualitative measure in the study - the semi-structured interviews - allowed the interviewees to express freely but this required the interpretation and empathy of the researcher later. The problem arises as other researchers may have interpreted the information differently so the inter-rater reliability.

Secondly, there might be a mismatch of understandings on certain concepts between the researcher and the interviewees. For example, the operationalization of 'break time'. The interviewees may understand this as the time when they unwound themselves. They might believe family affairs such as going to the market, picking up children and preparing for dinner were not 'break time'. In comparison, the researcher counted the time when the subjects were not sending takeaways as 'break time'.

Furthermore, the interviewees might have lied so this risks lowering the validity of the study. For instance, some may have claimed their income higher to appear socially acceptable. Some might have felt shameful for working part-time or in a state of unemployment.

Finally, all subjects recognized that weather was one important difficulty they faced during delivery, particularly on rainy days, which are common in southern

China, but not in northern China. The generalizability of the results of the job satisfaction rating may be effective to workers in southern China only.

For future research, the research suggests that a larger sample should be employed. There should be more concentration on the potential exploitation of the workers, and what legislations can do to protect the rights of the workers.

Bibliography

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