



A supervisor and his team of drivers assembled for a roll call, 6 March 2024. Source: a driver at a food delivery station.

Gendered Organisation of Platform Food Delivery Work in China

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How does food delivery work become masculinised? Frontline supervisors enact their gendered beliefs in recruiting desirable male workers. They deliberately retain poorer workers whose dependence on income is greater, thereby minimising labour turnover to generate more profits. Delivery drivers compete for economic and symbolic rewards and, by extension, for the markers of masculine success. A few driver-breadwinners are considered successful based on their ability to make money, while many others are deemed 'failures' and 'less-worthy men' by both managers and fellow workers. In this essay, we highlight the implications for gender equity and decent work in the platform economy.

Our motto is —', the supervisor chanted. 'Meituan Delivery, punctual and helpful [美团配送, 准时好用]!', dozens of drivers responded in unison.

At 9.30 am, drivers assembled for a roll call under a bridge near a residential complex. The supervisor reminded them to clean their delivery boxes, reiterated the health and safety guidelines, and reported the rate of delayed deliveries and bad reviews from customers. The meeting lasted half an hour. When it was over, drivers headed to the largest shopping mall in the area to receive assigned orders.

China's food delivery sector has grown to become the world's largest, with 11 to 12 million drivers (Ele.me 2024; Meituan 2024; State Administration for Market Regulation 2024). Most of these drivers are men. Meituan, the country's largest takeaway platform, with more than seven million drivers, for example, reports that approximately 90 per cent of its workforce is male (Meituan 2025). How is platform-based food delivery service masculinised? To address this question, we draw insights from gendered organisation studies, understanding gender as 'an ongoing interactional process embedded in everyday practices that constitute and sustain organizations' (Martin 2020: 271).

Our findings derive from a multi-site ethnography. Between March 2023 and June 2024, the first author conducted 16 months of fieldwork in Shenzhen, the primary field site, with additional investigations in Shanwei, Guangdong Province, and Beijing. His fieldwork involved participant observation through working as a food delivery driver, as well as interviews with co-workers and supervisors. The second author, in her role as an unpaid trainee, paired with drivers to deliver meals during three extended trips to Beijing between 2017 and 2018, and likewise interviewed co-workers and supervisors, as well as visiting their shared apartments. She had access to the food delivery station through a local friend's introduction and has since maintained contact with former drivers and their families. Together we aim to explain how gender plays a role in organising work and labour, and to better assess the consequences for men and women workers in the digital economy.

The essay is structured around three interrelated dimensions of the labour process: recruitment, the socio-spatial arrangements of workers' housing, and coordination of delivery service work. Managerial preferences for the recruitment and retention of male workers are evident, despite the apparent efforts of platform corporations to bring more female drivers into their workforce. Entrepreneurial drivers pressure co-workers, both men and women, to become 'competent' (有能力) and 'dignified' (有尊严). Workers and managers

construct a competitive workplace culture through the winning of material and symbolic rewards. We document the domination of men over women, as well as the distinction of 'hegemonic masculinity' from subordinated or marginalised masculinities (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Haywood and Johansson 2017; Messerschmidt 2018). The conclusion summarises the institutionalisation of a masculinised labour system and its impact on the working lives of male and female workers.

Recruiting Desirable (Male) Workers

A food delivery station depends on drivers' individual delivery services. Since managers will receive a bonus linked to the revenue of their station, they are motivated to boost every worker's productivity to increase their own gains. They seek to differentiate 'strong' from 'weak' drivers in the recruitment process. As Jiaxing (a pseudonym), a former supervisor in charge of hiring, explained:

For women, it depends. For those women whose skin looks milky and smooth, and good-looking, we'd tell them: 'It's a really hard job, and you have to finish many orders a day.' We figure that they can't tolerate the difficulty. But when we see those who can no longer 'eat the rice of youth' [吃青春饭], they might do a good job, as they have nothing else to do. For those who are young, we'd ask them to pay for the fee of borrowing a battery, a scooter, a uniform, and so on. This usually scares them, so they wouldn't want to do it.

Based on prevailing gender assumptions, the supervisor shortlists the ideal workers for a company. Indeed, another supervisor opined that a woman should find something 'more suitable' (更合适的), such as an office job. This gendered screening process (Acker 1990) explains in part why food delivery is male dominated.

When facing a shortage of labour, however, Jiaxing would consider hiring middle-aged women, who are regarded as less likely to switch between

jobs, given the structural barriers in the labour market posed by their age and family responsibilities. This suggests that some women, even if only a select group, could succeed in becoming food delivery drivers. In fact, as competition intensifies, companies have increasingly been reaching out to women. JD Takeaway (京东外卖), the food delivery arm of logistics giant JD.com, for example, has expanded its labour force by offering ‘job opportunities to the spouses of all food delivery drivers’ (Fan 2025). ‘Caregiving’ (关爱), ‘politeness’ (有礼), and other qualities associated with normative femininity can increase profitability. Emotional and communicative labour are valued in servicing, which are reinforced by the app’s customer feedback mechanism and rewards for customer satisfaction ratings (Chan 2021; Chen 2024; Han 2025; Huang and Zhuang 2023; Milkman et al. 2021; Sun 2024). Julietta Hua and Kasturi Ray (2021: 15) also provocatively suggest that the foundations of platform corporations’ accumulation are ‘anchored in biopolitical logics that naturalize the using up of some (reproductive) lives for the flourishing of other (consumer) lives’.

On International Women’s Day 2025, Meituan pledged to be more responsive to its approximately 700,000 women drivers (Meituan 2025). The company publicly stated that it would modify the order-dispatching system so that women workers would no longer be expected to handle large and heavy orders (大重量订单), such as rice bags, cooking oil, and bottled water. If implemented, this change could lighten the burden of manual work for female drivers, though it is not clear whether the policy would apply to male drivers. What is clear is that the company is trying to appeal to female drivers by addressing their issues of concern. In so doing, management essentialises differences between men and women, and affirms that women workers are not as physically strong as their male counterparts.

We are cautious of the paternalistic notion that protecting women in employment should involve limiting their role in more strenuous work, such as lifting heavy items or making deliveries that

involve multiple flights of steps in old residential buildings. We observe that even for stronger men, some deliveries are so heavy they must use tools to assist them or split deliveries into multiple trips. This practice of ‘protecting’ women, not merely in perceptions, promotes discrimination. Employers would then find it less useful or cost-effective to hire women, since they would be obliged to limit the intensity of the labour women have to undertake.

Putting (Male) Labour in Its Place

The gender disparity in the food delivery workforce can be further explained by considering the living arrangements for workers. A food delivery station accommodates workers in sex-segregated housing (if it has not rejected the hiring of women in the first place). When there are far fewer women than men, the cost of providing them with a residential space can be higher because of the lower occupancy rate.

Employers often confine workers to shared accommodation to reduce commute times and facilitate their availability for overtime, thereby blurring the boundaries between ‘workplace’ and ‘home’. Combining workers’ work and daily living activities, corporate management can better attract employees, including migrants from near and far.

Liu, a 22-year-old driver, recalled the day he arrived in Shenzhen in August 2022: ‘The flat comprised two bedrooms and one living room, all packed with bunk beds. I had to live with 17 other people. I was not satisfied with the environment and hygiene at all.’ He had moved to Shenzhen—known as China’s Silicon Valley—without knowing how difficult conditions could be in the low-end, informal ‘urban villages’. New arrivals such as Liu, without local support, find themselves dependent on corporate-provided housing to meet their basic needs. Drivers are not required to pay a deposit upfront, unlike in the private housing market, allowing them more financial flexibility. Supervisors directly deduct the rent from drivers’ monthly wages.

The housing is designed to attract the poorest people, based on management's belief that such migrants will be more compliant and willing to work hard. Jiaxing, the former supervisor, made this explicit:

What we most want to recruit are those who are really poor. They don't have money to pay for a meal, rent, or are in debt. They are those who are single-mindedly devoted to work really hard for deliveries [拼了命跑外卖]. In contrast, those who have some money, they just do an average job.

Married men also live in this type of accommodation, even though it is not family friendly: a bunk bed is suitable for only one person, not a couple, let alone a family. They clock in multiple hours, relying on their wife or other family members to look after their children and the elderly somewhere else, thus freeing them to make money, both during the day and at night. Most aspire to transition out of the temporary shelter to live with their family.

Clearly, employer-provided housing binds workers to socio-spatial arrangements that are conducive to production. The provision of crowded collective housing at the lowest cost is to facilitate the accumulation of profit, rather than employee welfare. Yet, there is a downside. Although the provision of accommodation helps employers recruit poor male migrants, the terrible housing and working conditions intensify turnover in the workforce.

To restrict workers' ability to quit, employers seek to increase the cost of job-hopping. Daliang, a 36-year-old driver, explained:

When I started this job, they told me that I'd buy a scooter in instalments, for a total of 2,100 yuan. It is divided into three instalments of 700 yuan each, which are deducted from my wage. Buying a scooter is just a set up. Once you get the scooter, they tell you to register it, and registering it means that it is your own scooter. They just want to trap you in, so that you stay here for at least three months.



Drivers preparing to take incoming orders at the shopping mall, 19 March 2024. Source: Zihao Zhang.

Indeed, the more precarious a job is, the less commitment workers feel to keep the job. Krzysztof Jankowski (2024: 725) discusses how low-income workers manage job insecurity: 'When one finds their "first job" or "only job", a precarious worker will often keep searching for something better and maybe even hop between a few jobs, but eventually people settle into one that is comfortable and stable enough.' Employment in a food delivery station is a revolving door, with relatively inexperienced drivers coming and leaving within a short period.

Employers are stressed about recruiting workers quickly and recruiting enough of them to meet consumer demand. When they try to bring in 'tough' women jobseekers who are deemed qualified to 'run orders' (跑单), they are mindful that women with small children might ask for family leave more often than their male counterparts. Considering the disruption to shift scheduling—even when women

workers are not granted paid leave—managers prefer to hire and retain male migrant workers, who are more likely to provide for their family by prioritising work and its paycheques.

Constructing Masculine Subjectivities at Work

The gender dynamics of digital labour, in our analysis, are shaped by both human and algorithmic systems, the organisational logic of which is premised on speed and efficiency. Drivers strive to hit bonus targets, chase gold-star customer satisfaction ratings, and climb the ranks to become the ‘King of Orders’ (单王). They master the assessment of delivery times within the set limits. Xiaoming, a 22-year-old driver who had been working for three years when we met him, drew a gender boundary by demarcating successful food delivery as a male niche:

This is a physically demanding job [体力活]. Women usually couldn't lift heavy stuff. We are also a group of 'real men' [大老爷们], macho and tough. We talk about everything. They don't have things to talk with us about. Plus, doing food delivery, we are blown by the wind and dried by the sun. Most of the women care about their skin. No woman wants to be tanned, do they? It is also a dangerous job. Most of the females couldn't ride a scooter properly.

Echoing Xiaoming, many male drivers consider riding a scooter a ‘man's skill’. Speeding and deadly accidents, unfortunately, are linked to the intensification of work, especially when the platform app dictates an unreasonably short delivery time.

Femininity and masculinity, as evoked in those gendered claims about driving ability, are constructed ‘relational categories’ that ‘operate fundamentally through contrast with each other’ (Salzinger 2003: 23). This is how Chenchen, a 31-year-old female driver, rebutted the claims that women lack driving skills: ‘Lots of male drivers say

that we don't ride scooters well. But, when they are riding to deliver, they ride the scooter recklessly. We ride quite stably.’

These claims about male and female drivers' ability remain contested. Xiangjun, not unlike his co-worker Xiaoming, commented on the appropriateness of women doing delivery work:

Why wouldn't female workers sit in a factory to work where there is an air conditioner? Delivery is a tiring job and you need to be exposed to the wind and sun. And this job is inconvenient for them. Think about it. Some men are disgusting. They order a meal at midnight. When a female driver calls them, they would flirt with her. Sometimes, when lots of men at home pick up their delivery, they only wear underwear. Wouldn't this be quite inconvenient for a female driver?

To the extent that customers regularly flirt with delivery drivers, Xiangjun sees women as weaker than men and unable to protect themselves from sexual harassment or aggression. Lots of women drivers would agree that some male customers are ‘disgusting’, and that most women would not wish to see men undressed when receiving deliveries. Studies of ride-hailing (Kwan 2022) and domestic workers (Dattani 2021) have highlighted that there is a genuine risk of physical aggression from men towards a woman by herself, which is distinct from and less common than the risk women pose to a man by himself.

In their arrangement of daily work schedules, supervisors discipline less-motivated workers by manipulating the ambitions of male breadwinners' willingness to work longer hours. This dynamic is exacerbated by the difficulty of calculating the ideal amount of time needed to complete orders, which is often based on the complexity of combining multiple deliveries to different sites while navigating traffic. In these circumstances, management must find methods to incentivise workers to work more. They provide the best-performing drivers with monetary rewards, along with ‘gold’ or ‘diamond’ status at the top of the workplace hierarchy.

Excessive overwork has nevertheless resulted in tiredness, errors, and more serious problems such as traffic accidents and death by overwork. Brother Gong, a delivery worker who was sensitive about the assignment of orders, complained to human resources:

I've made countless calls to Meituan's customer service. I told them: 'You're deducting money so heavily, and the orders are so few. The way you assign orders is very unfair' ... They just responded: 'But some drivers manage to complete many orders. You need to complete more orders to increase the rate.'

Resilient men are prepared for competition. By accusing drivers of being 'losers' who should be held fully responsible for their personal failure, the platform company avoids discussion of their work conditions. The intended outcome is to disperse labour discontent or keep workers' resistance at bay.

Workers' subjectivity and their gendered sense of identity intersect with the play of societal forces, such as the fulfilment of familial responsibilities as breadwinners (Berdahl et al. 2018; Holtum et al. 2023). Studies in Vietnam (Dinh and Tienari 2022) and China (Huang 2023; Zhou 2024) have found that male drivers often expressed anger and disappointment, feeling that their meagre income could hardly feed their families. In comparison with 'more successful' drivers, they were treated by peers as incompetent husbands and fathers. In our study of labour politics, we found that interviewees interpreted their struggle over pay rates as a mark of their individual failings as men. These findings highlight how employers' use of gender norms, and shaming over the non-fulfilment of those norms, can shift responsibility for the workers' plight away from employers, thereby pressuring workers to submit to the existing exploitative organisation of their work.

Concluding Remarks

Although food delivery work is inherently neither feminine nor masculine, it becomes masculinised through institutional processes that are a result of how gender functions in the workplace. Managers rely on men—particularly those who depend on the platform as their primary source of income—to fulfil surging orders. They provide substandard housing to ensure that the poorest and most desperate workers take the jobs. There are fewer female drivers, we believe, not because they are physically weak or unskilled, but because both managers and workers create an environment in which men are more likely to thrive.

The gendered component of worker subjectivity is vital to the organisation of work and the discipline of labour. Platform corporations seek to mobilise drivers by tying delivery speed to honorary titles and bonuses—the markers of career success. Among men, those who can support themselves and their family are respected; by contrast, those who struggle to make a living are disparaged and blamed for their weakness. Men who protest this contest over pride and shame face difficulties in raising questions of labour rights. The system of order dispatching and remuneration remains opaque, if not outright unfair. Future research should explore how workers resist the combined domination of gender and class in platform work settings. ■

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