

Small-scale worker resistance impacts food delivery economy in China

July 21 2021, by James Dean



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Small-scale. Short-lived. All digital. Out of public view. That's how a new form of collective worker resistance is unfolding in China's app-based food delivery economy, new Cornell University research finds.

Though highly fragmented and not always successful, "mini-strikes" by small groups of [food](#) couriers—conducted via WeChat—reflect a new form of leverage, suggest Chuxuan "Victoria" Liu and Eli Friedman, associate professor in the ILR School.

Food couriers are able to maintain complete physical invisibility, and each individual [worker](#) can 'strike' from anywhere, they write.

The scholars interviewed couriers, in-person and online, who delivered food for Ele.me, an Alibaba-owned company that controlled nearly half the nation's food-delivery market.

Platform-based delivery work has grown exponentially over the past decade. In 2020, Ele.me and Meituan, a slightly larger competitor, together had more than 8 million registered food-delivery couriers, the result of rapid growth achieved in part through exploitative working conditions, according to the researchers.

Friedman said scholars have wondered whether high levels of worker dissatisfaction seen in manufacturing would appear in this new sector. Their research determined it has—if you know where to look.

In addition to crowd sourced freelance couriers who work individually, Ele.me relies on a network of subcontractors that operate "stations" within city districts to provide restaurants with more reliable delivery services.

Like the workers themselves, the app rewards or punishes stations financially based on metrics including numbers of deliveries, worker attendance, on-time performance and customer ratings. That pressure on stations creates bargaining power for couriers who may choose to stay offline during peak lunch and dinner times.

"Simply by refusing to login to the system," they wrote, "a handful of couriers can cause considerable damage to the station's statistics."

Significantly, the government is either unable to monitor such small-scale labor resistance or tolerates it, since it causes minimal social disruption and appears apolitical.

"We've seen in the last few years that any kind of collective, coordinated action in China—for all kinds of activists—is really dangerous," Friedman said. "This refines our understanding of the way public protest can work in light of that new, highly repressive environment, and the role [digital media](#) can play in fomenting that kind of action, even on a small scale."

Strikes by food couriers are distinctive for their very small numbers, [short duration](#) and concealed nature, the authors wrote, revealing "one of the ways that labor unrest has evolved alongside shifting political, economic and technological conditions."

More information: Chuxuan Liu et al, Resistance under the Radar: Organization of Work and Collective Action in China's Food Delivery Industry, *The China Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.1086/714292](https://doi.org/10.1086/714292)

Provided by Cornell University

Citation: Small-scale worker resistance impacts food delivery economy in China (2021, July 21) retrieved 6 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-07-small-scale-worker-resistance-impacts-food.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--