

Survival on the margins: an inquiry into the lives of Majuqiao's temporary workers

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Abstract. Majuqiao temporary labor market, one of the well-known gig-economy platform, gathered thousands of migrant workers for seeking temporary employment. As informal labor grows, it is necessary to understand the operation system of such a permanent and enormous market. More importantly, concerns about informal workers' life quality needs to be address and analyze. This paper conducted semi-structured interview with randomly selecting 15 workers in the Majuqiao temporary market. The paper emphasizes three interviewees across different generation to explore their daily life. Finding shows that while gig-economy platform provided flexibility to migrant workers, it often comes with irregular income and labor exploitation. Workers are benefiting disproportionately from their employers, which resonates with Marx's perspective of surplus values. Therefore, the study highlights the current situation that is needed to change for the welfare of migrant workers and proposes effective solution to this existing problem.

Keywords: gig-economy, temporary workers, labor exploitation, surplus value theory

1. Introduction

Under the pressure of incapability to afford daily expenditure, numerous rural workers migrated to urban cities for work, particularly working as a temporary labor force. Temporary workers are defined differently from permanent workers, with often a lack of protection and employment stability under Chinese labor laws [1]. They are often excluded outside the scope of China's labor law protections, are not eligible for health and safety protection as well as unemployment insurance, and are classified under contracts for labor services. As a result, temporary workers are sometimes referred to as "workers without benefits" or "precarious workers" [2]. Although strict controls over permanent rural-to-urban migration are about managing surplus labor and elevating living conditions, they have led to rapidly growing migration [3], most temporary laborers are treated unfairly upon their employment. According to a study by V.Patussin, there were 1,499 reported occupational injuries among 18,210 permanent workers, compared to 392 injuries among 1345 temporary workers. The injury incidence rate was significantly higher for temporary workers, with a ratio of 2.46 (95% CI 2.02-2.99) [4]. Therefore, it is evident that a significant disparity is presented between standard employment and temporary work.

As one of the largest hubs for casual labor distribution in Beijing, the Majuqiao Temporary Labor Market has incessantly provided a temporary labor force for the city now and then. At the same time, its economic conditions are largely exposed to the public. The market's composition is a tapestry of diverse work types, ranging from construction and factory work to more specialized tasks such as electrical repairs and carpentry. Employment is secured through a verbal agreement, a handshake sealing the deal between the laborer and the contractor. The operational flow is straightforward yet chaotic: workers gather at dawn, hoping to catch the eye of employers who drive by in search of manpower for the day's tasks.

The workers in the Majuqiao temporary market are predominantly employed in low-wage jobs. Migrants typically come from rural provinces across China, where employment opportunities are limited. As urbanization accelerates, workers move to Beijing to seek better economic opportunities in the capital, but they face a host of challenges such as lack of access to public services, healthcare, and social security. They often live in informal housing like cramped rental rooms or makeshift settlements, supporting their labor-intensive lives.

Given their low incomes, workers in Majuqiao are relying on the local temporary market heavily for affordable goods. The market serves as a necessity, offering everything to these individuals from fresh produce to low-cost clothing. However, living in

such an environment means the workers often lack stability or long-term security. The market is vulnerable to relocation as urban development and gentrification efforts push further into peripheral areas, threatening the livelihood of those who worked there.

The case of Majuqiao serves as a conspicuous sign of the deep inequalities embedded in China's urban labor landscape. Such informal spaces existed in the metropolitan, reflecting a larger systematic issue that those temporary workers are pushed to the margins. Those workers, whose livelihood depends heavily on unstable and unsecured employment, are vulnerable to exploitation not only by the employers but also by gaps in resource distribution under the systematic framework of the market.

The root cause of this issue lies in the rigid operational trends of the labor market. Current distribution mechanisms inadvertently limit workers' equitable access to resources, which has endured for centuries. While central governments sought to create a more equitable labor market, they could not change this long-lasting idea embedded in people's minds. Consequently, despite substantial investments allocated to infrastructure or technology, these expenditures failed to yield improvements, as seen in the Majuqiao temporary market. This aligns with the Marxist perspective: owners of capital control disproportionately benefit from labor, while workers receive only a fraction of the value they produce [5-6]. In other words, the labor distribution system has been heavily skewed by the owners of the means of production, who capture a disproportionate share of the rewards. In turn, the inequalities present in the labor market create resource disparities among temporary workers.

The Majuqiao Temporary Labor Market, which is a major junction of labor in Beijing, encounters serious inequalities that are also prevalent in other parts of China's urban labor system. Though the government invests lots of money and capital to support the construction of infrastructure, this money and valuable resources often cannot fully reach the workers who do the actual construction tasks. Instead, these workers, moving from rural areas to urban towns to seek better job opportunities, end up with meager wages and unstable jobs, and even without protections afforded to permanent employees. To fully understand their condition and the challenges they face every day, I spoke with several workers at the market. These are personal stories and a reality where they work, they work in precarious labor and they face systemic inequities.

2. Interview data

2.1. Interviewee 1: the 36-year-old "Beipiao" from Heilongjiang

The first time I met someone was a 36-year-old worker in Heilongjiang. He is a typical "Beipiao" (migrant workers from the provinces who settled in Beijing) and had come to Majuqiao only a day ago. The bed he was staying on was a simple one that cost only 30 yuan per night. We had a lengthy conversation at five in the morning when the market was still quiet and the employers had not arrived yet. They both admitted they had almost no savings and had come to Beijing only to make ends meet. He worked the previous night at a temporary job at a hospital and earned 150 yuan. However, paying high living expenses almost used up all of the money for him. "And this work is really unstable," he said. Today, if I can't find suitable work, perhaps tomorrow will be the same. "I don't know how long I won't see my next paycheck."

But when I asked him why he did not select a more stable, long-term job since it is very hard to find work every day, he paused for a second and then answered quite slowly, "You know, long-term jobs have too many requirements and as for constant work it is so monotonous. There's no freedom. What kind of life would we have been able to live, already living tough lives, and then be expected to live the same, unchanging life?" His expression showed some confusion, and he sighed. "I look for work every day and I get by just a little bit from my hard labour but at least it puts me at ease. At least I have a little freedom in this way if this way is not stable. It is a small bit of money that lets me not completely slip into this great curved city."

This is a statement about the most prominent problem for temporary workers: unstable employment and insufficient income. Their income and livelihood are uncertain, and they have no long-term job security. Even though they have contributed so much to the city, their quality of life does not reflect the effort they give.

2.2. Interviewee 2: the worker from Henan

I carried on my visit and met another worker, he was from Henan and had been working at Majuqiao for several years. In particular, he appeared to not care for external attention and reacted negatively towards being filmed. When I asked him why workers were usually not happy when they were filmed, he coldly replied: "Who didn't know about Majuqiao when they came to Beijing? People see the struggling condition that we suffer, but they just carry on not bothering us." Cold indifference mixed with frustration found his words, eyes burdened by the weight of life, conveyed a deep sense of being overlooked.

"Have you ever seen someone who builds skyscrapers live in one?" another worker standing around piped in. But we work hard to build these buildings, the likes of which we can only live in dilapidated shacks. Never do the people have the benefit of seeing the effort we put in for their comfortable city lives." He seemed to be resentful. "In all these years, we have worked for so long and the money we have earned can and only can cover all of the living expenses that we have, leaving no extra money to do things we like. There is never enough to allow us to survive from the little bit of salary we have."

The words express the frustration many working-class workers have with their income and social status. However, the rewards these people receive in return for their contributions to society are way out of proportion. This situation is a result of ignoring low-income groups and the huge inequity in income distribution.

2.3. Interviewee 3: the loneliness and struggles of a worker from Henan

Later on, I talked at length to an older worker who also came from Henan. He had become a single-man builder, always trying to find some temporary work at the Majuqiao. His place of living was a small room, with a 1400 yuan a month rent per unit. He told me that he couldn't find a job to do every day, so when there was no work, he continued to come back to his shabby rented room, and even if his family could not offer any emotional support to him, he had no choice but to head back to his cheap rented room. "I don't ask for much, just that I could make a bit of money so that ends can barely be made. However, this meager income would not even allow me to have a day with peace of mind, leaving me on a tight budget where every penny is accounted for." While he struggled every day to change his circumstances and strived to make money, he could not even maintain basic survival with his small income. "There was almost nothing left, and all I had was exhaustion after a full day of hard work," he said.

His situation brings to the fore the pressure societies place on the low-income. And their high living cost coupled with an unstable income prevents them from truly stabilizing their lives. In other words, social inequality and this unfair distribution of living and income conditions are the root of this dilemma of living and income conditions.

3. Analyze

The case study in Majuqiao's temporary labor market brings about a result of individual frustration, and it reflects the broader system of economic exploitation. The realities happening among these workers are cruel, yet the problems presented, specifically the inability to afford daily expenditure, the imbalance between work done and rewards received by them, and the lack of long-term job security, are waiting to be addressed.

3.1. Monthly wage estimation: calculations and economic implications

To better understand the income disparity posed in the Majuqiao temporary labor market, this section provided a reasonable estimation of pure monthly profit that a temporary worker could earn, followed by the computational process showcasing each statistic and calculation.

The paper calculated the average monthly wage based on data collected from interviews, field observations, and official reports. The following variables were considered:

$$E_{min} = \text{Minimum expense} \quad (1)$$

$$E_{max} = \text{Maximum expense} \quad (2)$$

$$P_{max} = \text{Maximum pure profit} \quad (3)$$

$$P_{min} = \text{Minimum pure profit} \quad (4)$$

$$P = \text{Average pure profit} \quad (5)$$

According to the Beijing National Bureau of Statistics, the average monthly income for permanent workers is 4780 yuan. The employment covered includes the manufacturing industry, construction industry, wholesale and retail trade, transportation and postal services industry, accommodation and food services industry, as well as residential industry [7]. Since the average monthly income for temporary workers is less than that received by permanent workers, it is reasonable to assume the average monthly income for temporary workers is 4000 yuan.

Based on the data collected from 20 temporary workers in Majuqiao and statistics from interviews with others, several monthly expenses are obtained. The average monthly housing expense is 1000 yuan, ranging from 500 yuan to 1500 yuan; the average monthly food expense is 975 yuan, ranging from 750 yuan to 1200 yuan.

$$E_{min} = 500 + 750 = 1250\text{yuan} \quad (6)$$

$$E_{max} = 1500 + 1200 = 2700\text{yuan} \quad (7)$$

$$P_{min} = 4000 - 2750 = 1250\text{yuan} \quad (8)$$

$$P_{max} = 4000 - 1250 = 2750\text{yuan} \quad (9)$$

$$P = 4000 - 1000 - 975 = 2025\text{yuan} \quad (10)$$

The pure profit for a temporary worker ranges from approximately 1250 to 2750 yuan monthly, with an expected average of 2025 yuan. This figure is significantly lower than what we expected. With such wage suppression, many workers would be forced to work extended hours or multiple jobs. The profit range in the estimation suggested the volatility and uncertainty of temporary labor wages. More importantly, these wage disparities reflect what Marx described as the “expropriation of surplus value”, where employers suppress wages to extract maximum labor output.

3.2. Exploitation mechanisms: a marxist perspective

Marx’s theory of surplus value, a key concept in his critique of capitalism, explains that capitalists maintain power by controlling the difference between the full value of workers’ labor and their wages [8]. Harvey complemented that surplus value extraction is not limited to factory labor but also could be extended to informal work like temporary employment, where wages are suppressed through insecure employment opportunities [9]. The theory defines labor value and commodity value as aggregates determined by class relations, rather than individual needs [10].

The extraction of surplus value is evident in the Beijing temporary labor market, where workers benefit disproportionately from employers. The pure profit for a temporary worker of 2025 yuan suggested serious exploitation in capitalist systems. This inequality has further been exacerbated by the ongoing process of primitive accumulation, which keeps wages low despite productivity gains through excessive labor [11]. In addition, in the early stages of industrialization, inequality stimulated growth by concentrating resources in the hands of those more likely to save and invest. The relationship between inequality and economic development further bonded closely, enabling further exploitation among these workers [12]. These actions coincide with Marx’s concept of the general law of capitalist accumulation, where the wealth is concentrated in the hands of capital owners, while the workers encounter economic difficulties.

3.3. Why majuqiao temporary labor market endures

Although Majuqiao’s temporary market poses serious wage disparities and employment instability, this labor market has been operating for approximately 30 to 40 years. This is primarily because of the high demand for cheap and flexible labor power. Functioning as a significant pivot between Beijing’s central zone and the exterior logistics industry, the Majuqiao temporary market attracted massive businesses that require temporary, low-cost workers. Specifically, a lot of workers are hired temporarily for the construction, renovation, and demolition of infrastructure upgrades and urban renewal projects. The logistics and storage industries also require consistent labor needs for loading, sorting, and delivery.

In addition, most workers in the temporary market are migrant laborers without Beijing household registration, which hinders them from entering the formal labor market. A lot of them would be forced to rely on informal work with poor working conditions. The lack of access to stable employment or social security benefits ensures a sufficient population in such a temporary employment hub, even during weekends or festivals.

Last but not least, the survival model of temporary labor markets has relatively low cost, providing livable areas for workers. Workers can either enter or leave the market at any time without long-term commitment; various employment opportunities allow workers to choose appropriate jobs. Networks of workers could help each other to find a job, potentially improving employment chances. The housing in nearby urban villages offers low rent, guaranteeing a more manageable but low wage for these workers. The operation of a temporary market seems to be a preferable place for employers to hire laborers, while laborers sustain a livelihood in such an area. As a result, the Majuqiao temporary market became a crowded and necessary region in Beijing.

4. Conclusion

The Majuqiao temporary labor market serves not only as a hub for informal employment but also highlights systemic issues within China’s labor framework. Workers in this sector frequently encounter job insecurity and inadequate safeguards. Although government initiatives have prioritized infrastructure expansion, persistent inequalities in wages, social welfare, and equitable treatment demand further scrutiny.

Roughly, their wages, sweat earned, are meager to the point of not being able to support a basic existence, pushing them to the margins of civilization, far outside the reach of the most basic practices of fairness and dignity.

This informal labor market highlights systemic gaps in worker protections. Many temporary workers lack formal contracts, social security, and avenues for legal recourse, leaving them marginalized within urban economies. The truth is, however, that they don’t choose to do unstable day-to-day jobs out of laziness; they didn’t pick their job. Society itself has placed them in marginal spaces, and therefore they have no choice but to choose an existence suspended between the false promise of autonomy and the unreachable ideal of security.

To address these challenges, reforms could focus on strengthening labor protections, ensuring transparency in public spending, and expanding social security coverage for informal workers. Implementing independent audits and participatory budget monitoring would reduce fund mismanagement risks. Additionally, empowering workers through collective representation and legal safeguards could help balance power dynamics in the labor market, ensuring fairer wages and working conditions.

Majuqiao labor market does not exist from the market demand, but as part of a broader economic structure where workers often lack bargaining power and face persistent wage suppression. So long as the current economic model remains unchallenged, continue to operate in informal, precarious conditions, with limited upward mobility. If left ignored, China's urbanization and economic boom will be just a grand illusion, a real facade built on the backs of laborers who have no place in the very cities they helped to build.

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