

Precarious Labor in China and Its Consequences

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Precarious Work

I'd like to start with a piece of news from China. A worker, 54 years old, had been at the same company for 24 years. But formally this person was never the company's employee at all — he was on the books of a labor agency, dispatched to the shop floor to move packaging materials. On November 18, 2024, this worker took his own life in the workshop. The family said the company had never once paid the worker's social insurance — not in 24 years. So when the cancer came, none of the treatment costs could be reimbursed. In the end, the worker chose to die. The court has now ruled: the company pays the family 200,000 yuan. That's it. Twenty-four years.

This is what a precarious worker looks like. And precarious labor is what I want to talk about today.

Think about the West after the Second World War — the thirty golden years, 1945 to 1973. Workers did well in that period. Contracts became more stable, legal protection got stronger, welfare got better. Then neoliberalism arrived, and things went the other way. Wages stopped rising. Jobs got shakier. Protections and benefits were chipped away, year after year. Neoliberalism wants labor to be “flexible” — and flexible is really just another word for precarious. Over roughly the same stretch of time, China went through something similar.

Let me go back a bit. The People's Republic was founded in 1949, and its first thirty years —roughly from 1949 to 1976 — is what we call the Mao era. In those thirty years, wage employment as such was abolished and public ownership was established, so almost every urban worker was in a state-owned or collective

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enterprise. Stable job, full welfare. People called it the “iron rice bowl”(Tie Fanwan) After 1976, with reform and opening-up and the spread of privatization, that bowl was largely broken. Companies were privatized. Even the ones that stayed public laid people off on a huge scale. Fewer and fewer people had an iron rice bowl, and most workers ended up with insecure jobs, almost no legal protection, and almost no welfare. On top of that, farmers moved into the cities and became migrant workers — and precarious labor became the normal condition.

Let me put some numbers on this, so it's concrete. My figures come mostly from the Chinese American scholar Philip Huang whose work here dates from around 2017. Not the newest data, but the most complete we have. Take 2015. Total population: 1.375 billion. Actually employed: 770 million — about 400 million in the cities, about 370 million in the countryside. Of those 400 million urban workers, some 300 million were in precarious jobs. And since almost none of the rural workforce has real welfare coverage, here is the conclusion: 83 percent of Chinese workers are precarious workers. Only 17 percent have a stable, standard job.²

So who are these precarious workers? Roughly four groups. Migrant workers who came in from the countryside. Workers laid off from state enterprises in the 1990s. Dispatched workers in the cities — and there are more of them every year. And the self-employed, plus the so-called independent contractors. The worker I opened with, the one who fell ill and took his own life, was a dispatched worker. Stable jobs, meanwhile, sit mostly in state units, in the bigger private firms, and in foreign companies. And of all the stable, standard jobs, more than half are in state units.

Why is labor in China so precarious? There's one argument I find convincing. in the post-Mao era means of production have been substantially privatized, and the Chinese Communist Party has prioritized economic development over labour welfare, leading to recommodification, market-led distribution of life opportunities, and

² Huang Zongzhi (Philip C. C. Huang), *Zhongguo de xinxing feizhengshi jingji: lilun yu shijian* [China's New Informal Economy: Theory and Practice], Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2020, pp. 36–37.

thereby general labour precarity.³ I agree with this.

What Precarious Work Leads To

This precarious economy has changed social and intellectual life in China quite deeply. Here I want to focus on what it is doing to young people.

First, some young people have simply given up on the future. Around 2008 the economy was booming, and ordinary people expected a good job, a good life, an American-style middle-class existence. But as precarity spread, a middle-class job became scarce, and many young people lost the motivation to study or to look for work at all. That's what we call “lying flat”— tangping. And even those who do take a job don't work hard and put up with it the way their parents did. Bad conditions, bad pay — burnout comes quickly. In the cyberspace and everyday conversation, young workers describe themselves as *niuma*, “beasts of burden.” This sense of being a beast of burden comes mainly from overtime, exhaustion, and lack of sleep; from having no autonomy in the face of one's superiors; and from repetitive, meaningless work.⁴ Others have started asking what hard work are even for, and have walked out of the labor market on purpose, getting by on gig work here and there. That is a kind of anti-work thinking, and it is growing. The authorities don't like it, because officially, Chinese people — and young people above all — are still supposed to eat bitterness and work hard.

Second, the labor market has gotten worse, and that has changed where young people want to go. Plenty of white-collar employees in private firms are paid decently and their jobs are relatively secure — but the pressure is heavy and the overtime never ends. So a job “inside the system” looks very attractive. More and more young people join the enormous crowd sitting the civil-service and public-institution exams, hoping to get into a state enterprise and, ideally, into a government office. This fever

³ Feng, Xiaojun. *The Making of Labour Precarity in China since 1949*. Cambridge Studies in the History of the People's Republic of China. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026, p. 216.

⁴ Jie Guo, “The discourse of ‘beast of burden’ (*niuma*) on Xiaohongshu: A critical analysis of digital labor and self-deprecation.” *Discourse, Context & Media*, 73, 101047, 2026.

hasn't broken. The numbers have climbed for five years straight: in 2025, 3.416 million applicants made it past the qualification review — nearly two million more than in 2020. Some undergraduates start preparing for the civil service exam when they arrive at university and never take their coursework seriously. The interest in research, in ideas, in exploring anything, simply drains away. Everyone is trying to squeeze through the same narrow gate. What we lose is social vitality — and a generation's capacity to think critically.

Another consequence of precarious work is that, faced with unstable jobs and unstable lives, young people are eager to grasp some form of certainty at the level of ideas — especially the state and nation discourse. That has strengthened statism and nationalism. People who hold these views get called “little pinks” — *xiao fenhong*. The will of the state becomes their will; the achievements of the state become their achievements. When they encounter negative news about foreign countries, and especially about the West, they tend to adopt a rational, critical attitude; but when they encounter negative news about China, they adopt an irrational attitude, looking for every possible way to defend the state's negative conduct instead of confronting the country's internal problems and contradictions. One common strategy in such defenses is to treat China's problems as the work of foreign forces — claiming, for instance, that the discontent of Chinese workers has been stirred up from abroad.

Of course, there have been some positive changes among young people as well. In recent years, as working conditions have deteriorated, white-collar employees with respectable jobs have also begun to understand the situation of precarious workers, and to recognize that there is no fundamental difference between themselves and these workers at the bottom: all of them are “hired hands” (*dagongren*), beasts of burden working for a boss. Moreover, more and more young people have a first-hand sense of the oppression exercised by capital, and so many of them are turning toward Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought,⁵ even though in the current political and social environment such an intellectual shift is very hard to translate into

⁵ <https://monthlyreview.org/articles/the-material-basis-of-a-spectre/>

organized action.

So let me conclude with this. The government keeps telling us to spend more, to get the economy moving. It isn't working. And it won't work, unless the trend toward precarious labor is actually reversed — unless working conditions improve, unless workers get a real share of what reform produced, unless workers get some political power. Without that, neither social vitality nor economic life is coming back. Thank you.