

Working in China in the Covid-19 Era

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China managed to maintain a certain amount of economic activity during the lockdown, but at what cost and under what conditions? This article highlights the regime's use of the media alongside the political and market logics specific to China.

China shut down its factories, offices, shops and transport systems in late January 2020 in order to stop the spread of Covid-19, as result of which its population was strictly confined to their homes for weeks on end.¹ In China, however, as has been the case in other countries that have implemented a lockdown, not everything came to a standstill. In Wuhan, where the epidemic began, 12% of the working population continued to work, with a national survey indicating that 10% of employees were still working at the end of January during the Chinese New Year, 36% returned to work in February and 28% in March.² But at what cost was this proportion of the country's economic activity maintained and under what conditions? These are the questions that

¹ This text was produced as part of a research seminar on labour issues in China facilitated by Gilles Guiheux and held at Université de Paris.

² <https://ln.qq.com/a/20200316/040317.htm>

this text, focusing on those who remained at work during the weeks of confinement, seeks to answer.³

Examining the conditions under which some people continued to work offers a better understanding of how the Chinese economy will resume and could herald what lies ahead for many other countries. This question is all the more crucial in China given that employment is a major issue for the regime, which is legitimised by social stability. “Employment is the top priority for stabilising the economy”, Premier Li Keqiang⁴ recently asserted. The country is already facing an unprecedented decline in its labour⁵ market—a situation that is proving all the more complex to resolve since services now account for 54% of GNP and contribute 60% of growth. The government will not, therefore, be able to resort to major investment in transport infrastructure and construction, both of which have been used to boost recovery in the past. Migrant workers from rural areas will need to return to their (often casual) jobs in industry and urban services and recent graduates will need to find employment in order to avoid a social crisis, all of which presents a huge challenge.

An extensive reading of the Chinese press over the past few months both features testimonies from workers and highlights the official stance, as well as offering an indirect insight into issues that have been overlooked. The press is therefore considered a source of information in terms of both the reality of employment and the way in which the regime has portrayed it.

Bringing invisible factors to the fore

In China, as has been the case elsewhere, the workers mobilised during the pandemic have been those who tend to be almost invisible under normal circumstances. This is particularly true of women in low-level jobs, who were celebrated on 8th March, when the *People’s Daily* published a series of photos (see below) on its Weibo account accompanied by the following text:

³ The estimated 200 million employees working from home were excluded from the survey. See <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/a-blueprint-for-remote-working-lessons-from-china>.

⁴ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201912/05/WS5de83c6fa310cf3e3557c07d.html>

⁵ <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3050510/coronavirus-chinas-fear-mass-job-losses-looms-large-covid-19>

“She is a police officer, keeping the country safe. She is a cleaner who is still going to work. She is a nurse sent to Wuhan on New Year’s Eve. She is the architect responsible for building a hospital... They are on the frontline in the fight against the epidemic; they carry huge responsibilities on their shoulders. Today, as we celebrate International Women's Day, let’s send them a message of tribute!”⁶

As of 29th March, this message had been seen over 30 million times and attracted over 20,000 comments from Internet users, and the corresponding post was one of the focal points of efforts to boost the visibility and recognition of workers during the Covid-19 era.



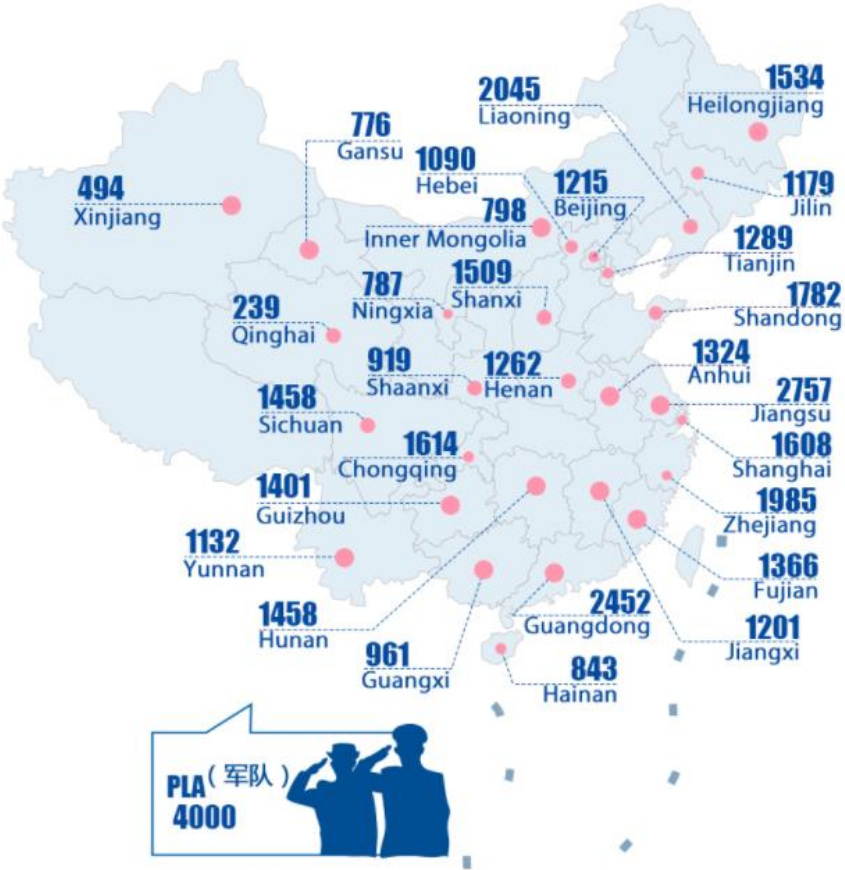
Portraits of women at work (<https://ln.qq.com/a/20200316/040317.htm>)

Healthcare workers, also known as “the angels in white” (白衣天使)—a term that was widely used during the SARS crisis of 2003—, find themselves on the frontline in the fight against the epidemic. Wuhan was medically well-equipped in 2018 (9 hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants) with 110,000 health professionals, including 40,000 medical practitioners and 54,434 nurses. By the end of January, however, reinforcements were sent in from all over the country (see map below), with 42,000 new nursing staff arriving in Hubei province, 35,000 of them in the city of Wuhan alone, and remaining there for between 18 and 50 days. Nursing staff were asked to work on a voluntary basis, and so numerous were the volunteers that some Party members were disappointed not to have been chosen.⁷ In Fujian province, meanwhile, a nurse described the difficulties she encountered, crying “I am a member of the Party,

⁶ <https://ln.qq.com/a/20200316/040317.htm>

⁷ http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-04/27/c_1125913583.htm

let me play my part!”⁸. Many nursing staff who were not yet members applied for membership before leaving for Hubei, using the phrase “join the Party in the firing line” (火线入党). Guangxi province consequently sent 962 nursing staff to Hubei, including 884 Party members, 474 of whom were new members,⁹ meaning that the Communist Party has also taken advantage of the health crisis to boost its membership.



Healthcare workers sent to Hubei by other provinces and the army (<http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202004/02/WS5e856aaea3107bb6b57aa579.html>)

Two-thirds of the staff sent were women, and while their faces were concealed by goggles and masks and their bodies by protective clothing, the press celebrated their “beauty” (美) in an attempt to glorify the sacrificing of their social roles as wives and mothers. It has to be said that the “beauty” of female nursing staff is primarily a symbolic and social concept, as if their contribution to the fight against Covid-19 can only be recognised if they are prepared to sacrifice their own beauty. Eighteen nurses from Jianyang (Sichuan), for example, decided to “join together and cut their beloved

⁸ https://k.sina.com.cn/article_2595230622_9ab0139e02000rqgw.html?from=newsubch=onews
⁹ <http://news.gxnews.com.cn/staticpages/20200422/newgx5ea01692-19470954.shtml>

long hair”.¹⁰ Extensive passages, including the following excerpt, have been written in testimony to their sadness: “although I’m really fond of my long hair, I think that as a health professional this is a time when we are really needed and shouldn’t hesitate to ‘streamline ourselves as we go into battle’ to help us more effectively fight the epidemic.” The recognition of female health workers involves them sacrificing their femininity, as a photo of a medical team from Gansu province also suggests, showing 14 women with shaved heads and only one man still with his hair (see below).¹¹



The team of healthcare workers from Gansu before they left for Wuhan (<http://gansu.gansudaily.com.cn/system/2020/02/15/017354838.shtml>)

The press did not, however, report on their skills or on the conditions under which they collaborated with the Wuhan teams. As a token of appreciation, when they started leaving the province as of 17th March, various celebrations were organised in the public sphere, including parades, local police escorts and the presentation of souvenirs—a great tradition in countries with authoritarian governments.

This rhetoric of sacrifice is reminiscent of soldier Lei Feng (雷锋), the selfless hero fabricated in 1962 who was believed to have spent the entirety of his short life helping others. There is also a clear Maoist reference here, with the photos of women published on 8th March accompanied by a hashtag that translates as “they are holding up half the sky in this battle against the epidemic”, in reference to the famous Maoist slogan “women can hold up half the sky” (妇女能顶半边天), the difference being that

¹⁰ <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2020/01-31/9074541.shtml>

¹¹ <http://gansu.gansudaily.com.cn/system/2020/02/15/017354838.shtml>

these heroic women of today no longer resemble the “iron women” (铁姑娘) that were the model workers of the 1950s. Social norms in the Mao era meant desexualisation, whereas it is the sacrificing of femininity that is today celebrated.

Increased social control

One Maoist Chinese institution that played a leading role in preventing the epidemic was the residents’ committee (居委会), responsible for ensuring that members of the population were properly confined to their homes.¹² First introduced in 1949, their role has been strengthened since the reforms of the 1980s to include some of the tasks previously assigned to working units that have since died out but dealt with matters such as neighbourhood security, the distribution of welfare benefits and family planning, meaning that the population would no longer be monitored in the workplace but rather in the home. Their employees were often retirees, and as a result of the rise in the number of tasks for which they are responsible, the institution has taken on a more professional dimension over time by recruiting young social workers. In the context of the Covid-19 health crisis, as was the case during the SARS outbreak of 2003, they have been on the frontline in the implementation of lockdown, prevention and control measures. They take the temperatures of those entering and exiting buildings, quarantine suspected cases, inform residents of new measures, disinfect public spaces and corridors, discourage residents from gathering and shop for those families unable to leave their homes. Liu Xuqing, head of a residents’ committee in Dalian, for example, keeps a close watch on just over 10,000 people with the help of his staff.¹³ Thanks to their knowledge of the field, these committees gather the information needed to adjust lockdown measures¹⁴ in real time and as close as possible to the source, i.e. the population itself.

These committees do have full-time salaried staff but are also reliant on volunteers (志愿者), given the magnitude of the task at hand. As was the case during the Beijing Olympics (2008), the World Expo in Shanghai (2010) and the G20 Summit in Hangzhou (2016), the authorities have relied heavily on volunteers and volunteer-staff to help fight the pandemic. A platform (known as ‘Beijing volunteers’, 志愿北京)

¹² <http://bj.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0224/c14540-33823410.html>

¹³ <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005291/abused-and-stressed,-chinas-community-workers-seek-help>

¹⁴ <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/13/WS5e45160aa3107bb6b579f5bf.html>

has been used to gather data relating to activity in the capital.¹⁵ As of 1st April, 5,428 projects had been set up involving over 92,200 volunteers who had put in an average of 62 hours per person since 27th January. Among the volunteers registered on the platform, 24% are members of the Communist Party (4 times more than among the population as a whole) and 16% are members of the Communist Youth League. Over half are over 45 years of age and 57% are women. Although young people are less strongly represented than their elders, it is, in fact, the under-30s who are the most celebrated by the press, as if to counter the stereotype of a generation of overly spoiled only children. The majority of volunteer activities are therefore undertaken on a neighbourhood level, in collaboration with residents' committee employees.

Volunteers are also being used to channel and register cars at motorway tolls, deliver donated protective gear, meals and healthcare workers to hospitals (especially following the closure of public transport in Wuhan), assist airport customs authorities in translating epidemiological information for foreign passengers, delivering distance learning courses to children of healthcare workers, register on the list of volunteers for vaccine clinical trials and help farmers promote unsold produce by filming videos that are then posted online.

In some cases, volunteers have even been replacing paid workers. In the village of Fuxi in the coastal province of Zhejiang, the efforts of volunteers called in by the Hangzhou Communist Youth League allowed market gardeners to sell over 6,000kg of fruit in the space of just three hours on 5th March, the day on which the nation commemorates Lei Feng.¹⁶ Volunteers in urban areas were called upon to work in factories, with some in Shanghai producing masks and gowns for nursing staff. In the Songjiang district, meanwhile, a night team of 20 volunteers made up of foreign business executives, company directors and students managed to produce 300,000 masks in just 12 hours,¹⁷ while young people in Pudong joined a company that manufactures protective clothing for nursing staff.¹⁸ This mobilisation of volunteers within companies, described as “temporary workers on production lines” (生产线上
的“临时工”), is reminiscent of other episodes during which this happened, such as the Great Leap Forward of 1957, when the emphasis was on “doubling production efforts” to “catch up with Great Britain”.

¹⁵ <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Fzxrl6Ti5bovg0rCYUOIHA>

¹⁶ <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/nsifo2Nevis16TrmuvbyJw>

¹⁷ http://www.xinhuanet.com/local/2020-02/03/c_1125527696.htm

¹⁸ <http://sh.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0323/c134768-33898064.html>

Everyday heroes

Dressed in orange overalls and equipped with masks and gloves, cleaners are another category of workers who are being asked to go the extra mile. Based on a systematic grid that is structured by neighbourhood, each administrative level (province, municipality, city, district or village) organises clean-up teams made up of the usual municipal teams, often reinforced by teams from other districts. Large numbers of individuals have been called into action, with the Chongqing municipality deploying some 55,000 people,¹⁹ Jiangxi province reporting an additional 80,000 people across the province and the municipality of Wuhan claiming to have rallied some 23,000 individuals to take part in a “mass clean-up on day 1”.²⁰



A cleaning team at work in Wuhan (<http://hb.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0406/c192237-33929806.html>)

Sanitation work has involved sweeping, washing down and disinfecting main and secondary roads, alleyways, dead-ends, street furniture, buses, underground platforms, public toilets and the like, while the number of daily refuse collections has also been increased and special attention paid to collection points for used masks, as well as to the bins at hotels used for quarantine. When it comes to reporting on the efficiency and scope of the operations undertaken, lots of figures have been quoted in the press, including not only those relating to the additional human resources

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ http://www.qstheory.cn/2020-04/07/c_1125823422.htm

mobilised but also many relating to the tonnage of rubbish collected, the length of streets cleaned, the surfaces disinfected, the number of dead-ends cleared and bins emptied and the disinfecting of public toilets, among other things.

Clean-up operations have been described with the sort of military rhetoric reminiscent of other battles that the Party has fought. The agents involved in the war against the epidemic have operated in squads, the city criss-crossed by a number of “lines of defence”²¹ made up of “workers on the frontline against the enemy”²². The entrances and exits of cities are strategic points that these cleaners-cum-“soldiers” (战士) have defended in an old-fashioned war in which “brooms and shovels have been our spears and shields”²³. In the framework of this relentless battle, inaccessible places have become a major issue in strategic clean-up plans, where “the enemy must be tirelessly hunted down, wherever it lurks,” to ensure that “the virus has no way out,”²⁴ and with this in mind, “cleaning is a painstaking task that requires the precision of a goldsmith.” In this race against the virus, emergencies can occur at any time, forcing cleaners to sleep in their workplaces.²⁵

Reports and articles have paid tribute to cleaners by drawing on the Maoist rhetoric of self-sacrifice and devotion, combined with the figure of soldier Lei Feng. Those concerned sacrifice their personal lives for the common good, modest citizens becoming civilian heroes (平民英雄) or everyday heroes (平凡英雄) who continue to undertake their mission despite the epidemic, giving the city and its inhabitants peace of mind. These people find themselves on the frontline in the fight against the epidemic, working while the rest of the city sleeps, watching over its inhabitants and keeping them safe from danger. Cleaners are hard workers who get up very early (as early as 4:30am) and do not take any days off.²⁶ Some work 10 hours a day. They have a real sense of responsibility. They devote themselves body and soul to the community, dealing with the danger themselves to give others peace of mind. When there is a shortage of masks, they go without so that nursing staff can use what resources there are available,²⁷ and while they may fear for their own health, they continue to perform their duties, even going so far as to hide from their families the

²¹ http://zjt.jiangxi.gov.cn/csgl/csglc/202002/t20200207_777693.htm

²² <http://www.fsonline.com.cn/p/274524.html>

²³ http://zjt.jiangxi.gov.cn/csgl/csglc/202002/t20200207_777693.htm

²⁴ <http://www.fsonline.com.cn/p/274524.html>

²⁵ <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/11/WS5e686ad6a31012821727e2a5.html>

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

nature of their work and the danger of contamination they face.²⁸ Their position on the social ladder in no way diminishes their devotion or sense of responsibility; quite the contrary, in fact, because even though this is not the case for all of them, “being a member of the Party begins with the smallest of gestures.”

Platform workers “serving the people”

The health crisis has accelerated the expansion of urban services involving platform workers—a sector that was already growing rapidly—, and delivery has proven to be a vital activity during the lockdown. Meituan and Eleme, supported by Tencent and Alibaba respectively, control 90% of the delivery market. Unlike healthcare workers, residents’ committee employees and cleaners, who are employed directly or indirectly by the State, platform workers are governed entirely by commercial logic. 75 million people, the overwhelming majority of them men, are believed to work for transport and delivery platforms,²⁹ and a recent report (April 2020) claimed that Eleme’s³⁰ 3 million delivery drivers, affectionately known as “little courier brothers” (快递小哥), were generally young (47% under the age of 30) and from rural backgrounds (80%). Over half of them (56%) were working at least one other job or studying at the same time—26% of them micro-entrepreneurs, 21% skilled workers, 11% taxi drivers and 20% students. As a result of the crisis, tens of thousands of unemployed individuals have become delivery drivers, from small business owners that had had to close their shops to employees that had been laid off and those that had previously worked on a casual basis. These rural workers in unstable jobs are the real workhorses in China’s urban growth.

The press refers to such workers in terms of both their sense of sacrifice—this being the sort of political logic we have already encountered—and the efficiency of the service they offer—representing the economic logic of the capitalist economy. In the south-east of the country, in the capital of Yunnan, meanwhile, “the weather in Kunming is getting warmer, it’s mild and sunny and it’s not hard to get out on the road.” One of them explained that he was “very proud to allow customers to enjoy hot meals and ensure that they lead a normal life (...). A lot of people think that the

²⁸ <http://www.fsonline.com.cn/p/274524.html>

²⁹ Chen, J. Y., "The mirage and politics of participation in China's platform economy", *Javnost - The Public, Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2020.1727271>

³⁰ <http://www.zjjdx.net/p/20200413486.html>

takeaway industry is very taxing and that you can't stick this job for too long, but I think it's a very good job. I am very proud to be able to serve others” (为别人服务).³¹ This expression, which represents the Party's core mission, is among the most famous in communist China, calligraphed by Mao Zedong himself and reproduced time and again in the public sphere.

On 6th March, during a visit to a logistics centre in Beijing, Li Keqiang paid tribute to the role that these workers have played, addressing the delivery drivers present as follows:

“this epidemic has meant that many industries have been shut down, but you don't get any rest. You are straight out on the streets every day, meeting the needs of thousands of households and businesses. Your deliveries are not only necessary for the people, but they are also truly heart-warming. You are out there facing the epidemic, and you are our everyday heroes” .³²



Li Keqiang visiting a logistics centre in Beijing on 6th March 2020³³

The mass distribution sector has also been recruiting en masse, with Hema, Suning, Carrefour and Walmart all offering temporary contracts to help deal with the

³¹ <http://society.yunnan.cn/system/2020/03/18/030619866.shtml>

³² https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6370345

³³ https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6370345

increase in their remote control business. Distribution giants have also, at times, negotiated the loaning of staff, known in Chinese as “talent sharing” (人才共享) or “staff sharing” (共享员工),³⁴ a practice that was relatively uncommon until now, with other companies in the catering and hospitality sectors that have been forced to halt trading. Similar systems have been adopted elsewhere, notably in France.³⁵ In Beijing, for example, Hema has taken on staff previously employed by various restaurant chains, with tens of thousands of employees affected by such schemes. This exchanging of staff is not, however, limited to the distribution sector; there has also been talk of cleaning companies using it, along with a Haier refrigerator factory in Hefei, in Anhui province. The local authority of the latter has, in fact, actively encouraged the process, with the city’s Department of Human and Social Affairs, through the media, encouraging restaurant employees to take 6,000 temporary jobs across 21 industrial³⁶ firms. Wages are either paid by the original company as part of an agreement between the two employers or directly by the new employer once a temporary contract³⁷ has been put in place.

The health crisis has also boosted business for service companies offering ancestral worship honouring the deceased in the event of a death, given that the family will be unable to travel (代祭服务). These services were developed in the late 2000s and aimed notably at migrants living abroad but demand failed to meet expectations.³⁸ During the recent Ancestors’ Day on 4th April, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and its provincial branches strongly encouraged the use of such services,³⁹ with demand for the latter consequently growing significantly. Over 15,000 collective celebrations honouring various deceased individuals and some 419,000 individual celebrations were held in different provinces.⁴⁰

³⁴ <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0323/c209043-31644635.html>

³⁵ In France, Spanish firm Zara tried to encourage its staff to work for Monoprix at the start of the epidemic. See https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2020/03/27/la-cgt-denonce-le-recours-a-des-salaries-de-chez-zara-par-monoprix_6034688_3234.html.

³⁶ http://epaper.xunbaoah.com/index/article/articleinfo?doc_id=2146

³⁷ <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0323/c209043-31644635.html>

³⁸ <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-04-03/074715412834s.shtml>

³⁹ <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/xw/mtbd/202004/20200400026462.shtml>

⁴⁰ <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/xw/mzyw/202004/20200400026674.shtml>

Risks and challenges of working during an epidemic

The Chinese press regularly highlights the same issues where each of these professions are concerned, first and foremost the protection of workers' health, and proof that efforts have not been consistent. How does one guarantee the safety of both delivery drivers and their customers? The health crisis has certainly challenged the practice of delivering a parcel into the customer's hands. In those buildings with the appropriate facility, the delivery driver would leave the parcel in a rack installed on the ground floor of the building.⁴¹ Once access to residential buildings was prohibited to non-residents, deliveries had to be made outside, with the delivery driver bringing the parcel to the roadside and contacting the customer to let them know it had arrived. This, of course, presented the new risk of face-to-face contact between too many delivery drivers and customers at the entrance to the property (see photo below). A solution to this problem was identified in the form of a colour code delivered via a telephone app. Equipped with a form of ID and a green code, the delivery driver could then once again enter residential buildings to deposit parcels in the relevant mailboxes. They would also sometimes be subject to certain protocols for checking their temperatures in the morning and evening and required to disinfect their vehicles and sterilise transportation boxes.



Delivery driver at the entrance to a residential building⁴²

⁴¹ <https://www.infzm.com/contents/177447>

⁴² https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6736561

The issue of the intensification of work is one that affects everyone. While replacement ancestral worship staff have been depicted in the many photos published, little is said of the overtime they work or the psychological suffering they endure. In Canton, for example, one such worker will bow before graves over 500 times in a single day,⁴³ while in Ha'erbin, two employees working as a pair wipe headstones and perform the rites at 10 to 20 gravesides a day;⁴⁴ elsewhere, one employee in charge of communicating with the relatives of the deceased works until 11pm and has even received calls at 2am on occasion.⁴⁵ Delivery and cleaning staff, of course, also face long working days.

During the crisis, active workers have also been exposed to psychological risks, and lockdown measures implemented by residents' committees have not always been well received. A video has been released illustrating the sort of resistance encountered,⁴⁶ with residents in various cities expressing their distrust, frustration and even anger. In Taiyuan, for example, one man drove his car into the temporary outdoor office of the residents' committee,⁴⁷ while a man in Dalian has been depositing dog excrement there at night.⁴⁸ Many weeks after lockdown measures were first introduced, those working for residents' committees are exhausted and in psychological danger.⁴⁹ Liu Xuqing has even been having nightmares of residents shouting at her. Some towns and cities have set up psychological support units,⁵⁰ and equivalent services are also available to healthcare workers and delivery drivers. Mrs Xiao Jinsong, president of the Hubei Psychological Consultant Association in Wuhan, has been helping staff who are afraid of taking the infection home to their families.⁵¹ Supermarket and delivery company Eleme has also set up a psychological support hotline to help its employees to deal with stress.⁵² The significance of the matter led to the central government publishing a "new work plan for psychological counselling"⁵³ in mid-March, requiring the departments of Health and Civil Affairs, the Federation of Trade Unions, the Communist Youth League, the Women's Federation, the Disabled Persons' Federation and other departments to start providing psychological

43 http://mzj.gz.gov.cn/dt/mtgz/content/post_5794836.html

44 <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1663044443798977977fr=spideror=pc>

45 http://mzj.gz.gov.cn/dt/mtgz/content/post_5794897.html

46 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UE1ee2jiydQ>

47 <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4474691631185391>

48 <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4478412649782152>

49 <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005291/abused-and-stressed,-chinas-community-workers-seek-help>

50 https://k.sina.cn/article_1840551510_6db4965602700rz1q.html?from=newsubch=onews

51 http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-02/18/c_1125589954.htm

52 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/dsGM1eCKGDbVBcrkIDSVVA>

53 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-03/19/content_5493050.htm

counselling services. The institutions that had been in charge of supervising the population since 1949 consequently found themselves with a new role to perform.

Matters relating to wages and pay conditions have been another major issue during the crisis, with the authorities taking the lead by outlining a series of recommendations. Shaanxi province, for example, requests that “wages be paid on time and overtime paid in accordance with employment law” and that “collective housing options such as dormitories be provided for agents drafted in from other areas”.⁵⁴ The actual situation out in the field is still unclear. According to one professional site, delivery drivers have found themselves in a difficult position in that those who usually work in now-deserted business districts have seen their income decrease by 50% or more, while those covering more residential areas, where families have been confined under lockdown measures, have seen an increase in their workload.⁵⁵ Difficulties in terms of getting to customers, longer waiting times and increased competition thanks to the arrival of new employees, however, have had the opposite effect. Social stability today depends on companies complying with orders issued by the authorities and maintaining a decent income for employees.

Conclusion

This situation that has developed among Chinese workers in the Covid-19 era and the way they have been portrayed in the press reveals certain facts and strategies that are not entirely unique to the People’s Republic. In France, for instance, we have seen the same emphasis on workers who tend to be invisible under normal circumstances, portraits of heroes with the emphasis very much on women, who are particularly exposed to risk since they represent the majority of those working in the care professions.

What is specific to China, however, is the regime’s use of the media and the simultaneous coexistence of both political and commercial logics, the former reminiscent of certain other moments in China’s history since 1949, when the Communist Party has used mass mobilisation to boost economic development, fight its political enemies, improve hygiene and fight other epidemics. With this in mind, Xi Jinping’s China still has institutions capable of supervising the population, including

⁵⁴ <http://js.shaanxi.gov.cn/zcfagui/2020/2/109602.shtml?t=2031>

⁵⁵ <https://www.yunshuren.com/article-22342.html>

the Communist Party, the Federation of Trade Unions, the Communist Youth League, the Women's Federation and the residents' committees. These social control tools have helped by finding volunteers and helping companies to recruit replacement workers and have praised one another's efforts. The rhetoric of how the reality of employment is represented is also classic, portraying workers as being selfless and sacrificing their personal lives for the common good. At the same time, private employers have relied even more heavily than before on precarious platform workers who are paid by the job, have no protection in the event of an accident and are generally not entitled to any social benefits. Chinese capitalism has left some workers, mainly migrants from rural areas, without protection, and this irregularity has certainly intensified.

What does the crisis have in store for the future of employment in China? The digitalisation of the economy has certainly accelerated to the benefit of the Chinese web giants, and the crisis has also revealed a number of invisible factors, as a result of which some professions should see now their status improve. Some are also calling for more public funding for healthcare. In mid-March 2020, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, together with the National Bureau of Statistics and other administrations, published a revised version of the professional code. Delivery drivers are among the 16 new professions now included,⁵⁶ which will have certain consequences in terms of the development of skills standards and vocational training. The development of staff loaning schemes between companies has also been highlighted as one possible way to stabilise the labour market, though it is unclear whether such loans would be dependent on the agreement of the employees concerned. At a time when the country is facing immense challenges in terms of employment, the crisis has only served to highlight the coexistence of the political logics of social control and the market logics that seek to serve the powerful interests specific to Chinese capitalism.

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⁵⁶ <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0323/c209043-31644635.html>

