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# The local station as the contested space: the formation of variegated agency of food delivery platform riders in China

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## Abstract

Platform scholarship has highlighted how digital workers engage in both collective and individual actions that disturb or challenge algorithmic systems. However, it has largely overlooked the variegated labour agency that emerges at the local level, particularly those embedded within the control structures governed by physical stations in food delivery platforms in China. These stations function as local hubs from which riders begin their shifts, and operate sub-algorithmic systems manually allocated by the platform, while directly managing recruitment, dispatching, and daily supervision. Based on research among food delivery workers in Guangzhou, this paper zooms in on two core questions: (1) What forms of labour agency among food delivery riders are found locally? (2) How is this variegated agency shaped by fluid local control regimes? Drawing on Katz's classification of labour agency and the Local Labour Control Regime (LLCR) framework, this paper examines everyday tactics within stations and their formation in local environments. For these we draw on six months of fieldwork in China including 92 interviews, with food delivery riders. Findings reveal that workers adopt both resilience and reworking strategies. Resilience strategies are further categorized into adaptation, disturbance, and disruption actions, often shaped by the internal environments of the stations. Notably, few riders attempt to confront the algorithmic system directly. Instead, their actions primarily respond to internal station-level regulations. These strategies can both reinforce and disturb local platform control. For instance, riders may intentionally delay orders or 'vote with their feet' by switching stations, often within the same delivery zone. These actions are deeply shaped by local control dynamics influenced by historical, social, and institutional contexts, prior job experiences, career path, and precarious living conditions. This paper highlights how beyond resistance to algorithmic control, diverse everyday tactics at the local scale deserve greater attention. Here with the paper contributes to developing more nuanced accounts of variegated labour agency. It refines Katz's classification by examining how labour agency is embedded in regional contexts. Additionally, this paper deploys the LLCR framework to extend its empirical application to non-Western contexts.

**Keywords:** Food delivery platform, variegated agency, precarity, labour geography, China

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