
Negotiating Control: Algorithmic Management and Labour Agency in China

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on platform labour has moved beyond the binary of compliance versus defiance, illuminating how workers deploy subtle, adaptive strategies to navigate algorithmic control. However, these insights are primarily drawn from liberal-market economies or China's megacities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, paying insufficient attention to transitional urbanising areas where platformisation and urbanisation unfold in tandem.

This study addresses this gap by examining how drivers of DiDi, China's dominant ride-hailing platform, experience and navigate algorithmic management in Xi'an in western China. Combining interviews, participant observation, and a platform walkthrough of DiDi's driver interface, the study uncovers a range of situated strategies of DiDi drivers to cope with and resist algorithm control of their labour process. These strategies include selective order acceptance, manipulation of dynamic pricing, and informal support networks through WeChat (China's mainstream instant messaging app). While not overt acts of defiance, these practices reflect tactical engagements with algorithmic governance that enable workers to preserve a degree of autonomy within a tightly controlled environment.

This study argues that resistance strategies among DiDi drivers are shaped by a dual governance structure in China's platform economy, where algorithmic control by platforms is closely intertwined with state-led infrastructural and regulatory frameworks. Rather than merely overseeing platforms, the state actively co-produces the conditions of platform operations through mechanisms such as licensing systems, identity verification, and platform-data monitoring. In contrast to Beijing or Shanghai, where this co-production is institutionalised and supported by mature infrastructures, Xi'an's fragmented and still-evolving governance environment, marked by infrastructural limitations and administrative variability, fosters informal and improvisational resistance under algorithmic control. Framed through hybrid governance, this study demonstrates how overlapping algorithmic and regulatory controls constitute a multi-layered field of negotiation, wherein workers mobilise tactical agency to subtly navigate and resist systemic constraints.

Foregrounding Xi'an as a transitional urbanising region, this study broadens the geographical focus of platform labour research and extends the discussion of hybrid governance by showing how resistance is shaped by uneven development and fragmented, co-produced governance dynamics. It challenges dominant narratives in China derived from megacities and reveals how platform labour is enacted, governed, and contested within the hybrid governance structures of China's state-capitalist system. Therefore, it contributes to and nuances the existing literature on platform labour and algorithmic management in China by offering a differentiated account of resistance grounded in geography and institutional variation.

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Keywords: Platform Labour, Algorithmic Management, Hybrid Governance, Tactical Agency, Transitional Cities, Labour Resistance, DiDi