

DETERMINANTS OF ENTRY INTO THE GIG ECONOMY FOR CHINESE WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

The gig economy has led to the emergence of new employment models mediated through digital platforms in China and has revolutionized the employment setup. Although gig work has been claimed to be flexible and an opportunity-sustaining sector, the engagement in this form of labor market is conditioned by a complicated combination of economic, institutional, educational, and demographic determinants. This article reviews the factors of entry into the gig economy among Chinese workers by integrating results of the labor market segmentation theory, human capital views, and digital labor studies. Specific focus is placed on the contribution of education, gender, sectorial inequality, fertility intentions, migration, and digitalization to influence the decisions of the workers to use platform-based employment. Combining the results of empirical research on wage disparities, labor markets transformations, and institutional reforms in China, the article proposes a complex model of labor market moves and how specific structural limitations can shape these decisions. The research adds to the accumulating body of literature on the digital labor by contextualizing the engagement in the gig economy within a larger transformation in the Chinese labor market and the structural inequalities.

Keywords:

Gig economy; Digital labor; Labor market segmentation; Gender inequality; Entry decisions; Platform work; China; Employment structure.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the research, the background section presents the overview of the current condition of how law enforcement officers and correctional policies are depicted in the media. <human>1.1 Background and Research Context: The background section gives the overview of the current state of media portrayal of law enforcement officers and correctional policies. Within the last ten years, the gig economy has become an important part of the Chinese labor market, due to both fast digitalization and platform growth along with changes in the employment structure. Online services that are used to provide ride-hailing, food delivery, freelance and online work to perform tasks have provided millions of workers with new income-generating opportunities. These changes have come alongside wider shifts in China labor market which have comprised increment in wage inequality, division of the sector and diminution of the traditional employment security (Gustafsson & Li, 2000; Shen and Deng, 2008). Consequently, the motivation behind the workers joining the gig economy has become a crucial question among the labor economists and policymakers. Although gig work can be presented as a voluntary decision that is driven by flexibility and autonomy, there is increasingly growing evidence that access to the gig economy is often defined by structural limitations and not entirely by choice. The labor market division, the gender gap, and disproportional returns on education remain the barriers to accessing reliable and high-wage labor, which keeps some groups within the platform-based employment (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024). This poses some key questions of whether the involvement of gig economies is an act of empowerment or a reaction to being excluded by the traditional workplaces.

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1.2 Transformation in the Labor market in China.

The shift towards a market-oriented economy in China as it was changing towards a centrally planned economy completely changed the employment relations, as well as wage-setting mechanisms. The breakup of the iron rice bowl and the growth of the private and informal sector of labor made the labor markets more flexible at the expense of further enhancing inequality (Gustafsson and Li, 2000). The segmentation based on ownership and sectoral one has remained, where workers in the private sector and informal sector have experienced higher wage fluctuations and ineffective social protection as compared to those in the public sector (Ma, 2018; Liu et

al., 2000). These structural features offer a significant background of entry to the gig economy. Employment has also been further fragmented with the emergence of the digital platform, making the lines between formal and informal work blurred. The gig workers are usually treated as independent contractors and not employees, which restricts access to labor protection and social insurance. Platform work can also be a feasible, albeit precarious, alternative to workers who have trouble in the traditional labor market (Han et al., 2024).

1.3. Education, Skills and Employment Choices

The growth of education has brought massive changes in the labor supply of China as the new generations have attained greater access to schooling than the preceding generations. Nonetheless, education will not secure a stable job and fair compensation. It has been proven that women and some demographic groups earn less returns to education, especially in the market-based fields (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). Such disproportional returns affect the decision to work, such as deciding to do gig work. Well-educated employees could be forced into the gig economy because of skill disparities, underemployment, or inability to secure professional jobs, whereas less-educated employees could be forced to use the platform work because they are not employed officially. Therefore, education is an enabling and limiting aspect in the entry of the gig economy depending on the sectoral and institutional circumstances (Hannum, 2005).

1.4 Gender, Family, and Employment Constraints

In China, gender is a dominant factor in determining the opportunities and limitations of the labor market. The continued gender pay disparity, labor division, and discrimination reduce the chances of women to access high-paying and secure employment (Bai et al., 2022; Iwasaki and Ma, 2020). The decisions of women to supply labor are further affected by family issues, along with having fertility intentions, specifically in connection with the changing family regulations and childcare demands (Li and Xu, 2022). To a great number of women, gig work is an opportunity with flexible schedules that may be integrated with the need to take care of the children. Yet, this flexibility frequently means reduced income and earnings as well as financial turmoil instead of mitigating gender inequality (Han et al., 2024). Gendered restraints and domestic processes are, therefore, valuable in understanding the entry of the gig economy.

1.5 Migration, Globalization and Digital Opportunity

The mobility of Chinese people to internal areas has been a significant factor in the urban labor markets of China with the migrant workers subjected to institutional restrictions concerning the hukou status. The disadvantage in employment and wages is further complicated in female migrants especially (Qin et al., 2016). The gig economy has the potential to offer a better alternative since digital platforms can make it easier to enter the country by minimizing the use of official qualifications and local registration. Simultaneously, globalization and contact with the global market have augmented wage differentiation and workforce insecurity in particular divisions (Chen et al., 2013). These forces play with digitalization as they affect the decision of workers to find a different source of income in the form of gig work.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The first conceptualization of the issue is the concept of entry into the Gig Economy

The gig economy is also defined as a form of labor mediated through digital platforms that pair workers with short term and task-based work. Although the ancient accounts focused on flexibility and entrepreneurial possibility, the current studies point to the structural forces that influence involvement in the gig work. The move into the gig economy is being considered more as an adjustment strategy in the labor market, than as a voluntary one (Han et al., 2024). These processes are strictly connected with the tendencies of labor market segmentation and wage inequality in China.

2.2 Workplace division and Giga employment

The theory of labor market segmentation is a valuable way of explaining the entry to the gig economy. Under this view, there are unequal distribution of workers in main and secondary segments of the labor market in terms of wages, stability and mobility. In China, the secondary segments, which are less-protected workers and migrants, are found to be disproportionately represented by women, migrants, and less-protected workers (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024). Gig work is often a kind of continuation of this secondary segment. Segmentation in terms of ownership has an additional effect on gig attendance. With an increasing number of people working in the private sector and a decreasing job security, adjustable contracts become an additional or alternative source of income, so platform work can be sought out by workers (Ma, 2018). This indicates that the entry of the gig economy is strictly associated with institutional weaknesses of the traditional employment systems.

2.3 Education and Returns to Skills

According to the human capital theory, education is supposed to lessen dependence on uncertain jobs. This assumption is however complicated by evidence in China. Even though education raises earnings potential, there are gendered and industry-specific variation of returns (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). The giant majority of the gig economy may consist of individuals of high education level who face underemployment or lack access to higher labour market domains, especially in the competitive urban setting. According to Hannum (2005), the educational outcomes interplay with family strategies and labor market institutions to influence the employment paths in gendered ways. Consequently, education fails to have a consistent effect of safeguarding workers against precarious employment such as gig work.

2.4 Gender Wage Inequality and Gig Economy Entry

Another important factor of the participation in the gig economy is gender wage inequality. Constant wage disparity and discrimination diminishes the motivation of women to stay in conventional jobs, and the flexible platform work becomes more appealing than the risky one (Bai et al., 2022; Iwasaki and Ma, 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that gender wage disparities in the gig economy tend to be broader as compared to conventional industries and are indicative of algorithmic discrimination and occupational division (Han et al., 2024). These results indicate that the entry of gig economy might be a limited option among women and not a best employment strategy to follow and support the current labor market disparities.

2.5 Demographic and Family Influences

The fertility expectations and care giving obligations in China contribute greatly to the employment choices. More women are likely to consider flexible work, such as gig work, when they plan to give birth to new children (Li and Xu, 2022). Migration status is also a factor that influences the entry into the gig economy since migrants cannot receive institutional access to formal jobs and social provisions (Qin et al., 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

In this research, the systematic integrative review and analytical synthesis design is adopted to observe the determinants of the movement into the gig economy among Chinese employees. With the multiplicity of the empirical methods, data sets, and theoretical approaches to be applied in the existing research on the labor market in China, the synthesis-based approach is particularly adequate to streamline the findings and uncover common trends in industries, demographics, and institutional settings. This method enables the incorporation of the knowledge of labor economics, gender studies, demography, and digital labor studies to come up with a comprehensive picture of the participation in the gig economy (Shen and Deng, 2008; Iwasaki and Ma, 2020).

The study is exploratory but its analysis of peer-reviewed empirical studies on labor market segmentation, wage inequality, educational returns, fertility intentions, migration, and digitalization in China is systematic. This methodological decision can be especially justified by the structural character of the involvement in the gig economy and the necessity to contextualize a single choice of employment in the institutions and socio-economic context (Zhu, 2025).

3.2 Data Sources and Inclusion criteria

The research is based solely on the list of scholarship sources given, which in combination makes up a solid and interdisciplinary research on the dynamics of the Chinese labor market. These are journal articles that have been published in such journals as *Acta Psychologica*, *PLOS ONE*, *World Development*, *SAGE Open*, *Journal of Population Economics*, and *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*. Collectively, they encompass the usual configurations of the labor market and new types of digital jobs (Han et al., 2024; Li, Hu, Jin, and Han, 2025). The following criteria were used as inclusion criteria. To begin with, there was a need to do studies concerning employment choices, wage performance or labor market placement in China. Second, the articles had to offer clear information on the determinants that are applicable to the entry in the gig economy, which may be the gender wage disparity, the sectorization of the labor market, the educational returns, migration status, or childbearing intentions. Third, the inclusion was limited to studies that were based on empirical analysis or systematic review in order to control the rigor of the analysis (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024; Bai et al., 2022).

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework that will inform this study incorporates four fundamental dimensions, which are structural labor market conditions, individual human capital, demographic and household dimensions, and digital institutional arrangements. Structural conditions are sectoral fragmentation, the form of ownership, and the wage system, and they determine the access to stable jobs and the motivation of workers to find other sources of income (Ma, 2018; Liu et al., 2000). Human capital determinants are concerned with the level of

education and payoff on education, where it is known that the unequal appreciation of skills may drive workers into gig jobs (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). Demographic and household can be characterized by the gender and fertility intentions, caregiving duties, and migration, which have an impact on labor supply choices and job constraints (Li and Xu, 2022; Qin et al., 2016). Lastly, digital institutional forms include platform governance, algorithmic management, and task allocation schemes that determine access to the gig work, as well as income potential (Han et al., 2024).

The following is the conceptualization of Gig Economy Entry.

This paper views entering the gig economy as a limited employment choice, which is influenced by the need and opportunity. Although there are also workers who engage in gig work to take advantage of flexibility or income diversification, others engage in gig work because of being excluded by the secure and well-paid jobs. This conceptualization conforms with the segmentation-based analyses of the labor market in China that focus on structural obstacles and disparate access to both primary sectors of the labor market (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024). The entry of the gig economy is thus discussed not as the individual choice but as the reaction to overlapping pressures pertaining to wage inequality, employment insecurity, and gaps in labor protection. Measurement and Comparative Logic This takes the place of the second grade math topic: numbers and fractions.

In the reviewed articles, the determinants of employment decisions are quantified with the help of various quantitative and qualitative measures, such as wage differentials, employment status, sector affiliation, educational attainment, and demographics features. The factors that are related to the outcomes of the labor market are usually identified through regression-based analyses and decomposition methods, and the qualitative interpretation is aimed at contextualizing the employment strategies of workers (Iwasaki and Ma, 2020; Bai et al., 2022). The comparative logic is used in demographic (men vs. women, migrants vs non-migrants), sectors (public vs. private), and forms of employment (traditional employment vs. gig work). With the help of this, it is possible to identify systematic correlations between labor market disadvantage and the entry in the gig economy.

The research had methodological limitations, which are discussed in the following section.

Although the integrative approach gives a very broad outlook, it has its limitations. The limited direct comparability of studies may be due to differences in data sources, periods and techniques of analysis. Also, digital labor markets keep changing very quickly, so some of the findings can be changing as platforms and the regulatory framework evolve (Han et al., 2024). However, the similarity of the patterns observed in more than one study provides more strength to the validity of the synthesized conclusions.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Gig Economy Entry Determinants Summary

The synthesized results indicate that structural pressures, disproportionate returns to labor market, and population pressures are the foundation of entry into the gig economy in China. Instead of voluntary participation, the entry into the gig economy can be seen as an adaptive behavior among those workers who experience some form of wages penalty, lack of employment security, or even a ban on competing in the main segments of the labor force. These trends are similar in regard to gender, sector, and occupation aspects (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024; Han et al., 2024).

4.2 Workforce Divisions and Labor Insecurity

The high degree of relationship between labor market segmentation and entry to the gig economy is one of the most consistent findings of all the studies. They include workers who work in privatized companies, informal jobs, or fluctuating contracted jobs with a high possibility of using gig working (Ma, 2018; Liu et al., 2000). The loss of long-term employment guarantees and the growth of flexible labor contracts have driven income volatility, which workers are managing with is to find alternative or supplementary income on the digital platform.

These results indicate gig work as a sub-labor segment, which consumes the workers who are expelled or marginalized by the structural reforms of the traditional work patterns.

4.3 Education and Inequality of Returns.

The entry to the gig economy is a complicated issue of educational attainment. Although higher education typically enhances the likelihood of securing a job, gendered and sector-specific returns to education make higher education less protective against precarious jobs (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025). Gig work can be used as a short-term or secondary measure by highly educated workers whose skills are either not matched or underutilized.

Meanwhile, unskilled employees are dependent on the services of the gig economy as they have few opportunities to find official working positions.

This two-fold trend suggests that the entry in the gig economy is not limited to one educational category but represents a larger issue of inefficiency in the human capital upon distribution.

4.4 Gender Wage Inequality and Household Constraints.

Gender becomes one of the factors that are instrumental in the participation of the gig economy. The constant gender differences in pay and occupational segregation diminish the motivation of women to continue in the traditional workforce, especially with the addition of caregiving duties (Bai et al., 2022; Iwasaki and Ma, 2020). Research shows that women usually join the gig economy to meet their domestic needs and procreation strategies, particularly when they intend to have a second child (Li and Xu, 2022). Nevertheless, it is also proven that gender wage disparities in the gig economy are quite significant, and, in fact, increase in some instances because of task division and algorithmically controlled environments (Han et al., 2024). This implies that the entry of the gig economy can strengthen instead of solve gender-based inequality in the labor market.

4.5 Migration and Institutional Exclusion

The status of migration has a critical influence on the entry in the gig economy. Internal migrants are confronted with institutional challenges in hukou enrolment, which restricts their access to formal jobs and social service (Qin et al., 2016). Digital platforms reduce the barriers to entry since they do not require the use of formal qualifications and local registration, which makes gig work especially appealing to migrant employees. To the case of female migrants, the gig work offers an alternative form of employment which is flexible but precarious and depicts compounded disadvantages.

Determinant	Direction of Influence	Key Supporting Studies
Labor market segmentation	Increases likelihood of entry	Li, Tang, & Jin (2024); Ma (2018)
Unequal returns to education	Encourages entry under mismatch	Li, Hu, & Jin (2025)
Gender wage inequality	Higher female participation	Bai et al. (2022); Han et al. (2024)
Fertility intentions	Increases demand for flexibility	Li & Xu (2022)
Migration status	Raises reliance on gig work	Qin et al. (2016)

Table1. Key Determinants of Entry into the Gig Economy for Chinese Workers.

CONCLUSION

6.1 Overview of Findings

The paper offers an in-depth analysis of the factors that affect the access of the Chinese workers to the gig economy. The analysis is based on the synthesis of the evidence presented by the studies on labor market segmentation, gender wage disparities, educational gains, demographics, and digital labor studies in order to identify that the engagement in the gig work is defined not so much by the individual choices but by the structural limitations (Li, Tang, and Jin, 2024; Han et al., 2024). The reason why workers join the gig economy is not just to seek flexibility or autonomy, but to respond to wage punishment, restricted access to a stable job, and institutional marginalization as well as domestic demands.

The results show that the labor market segmentation is a powerful phenomenon, and people working in the private, informal, or precarious jobs are more likely to choose the gig work as the additional or alternative source of income (Ma, 2018; Liu et al., 2000). In addition, the paper highlights that education, although broadly positive, does not entirely protect workers against vulnerable working conditions. The imbalance of returns to education and skills inequality decreases the capacity of the workers, particularly females and younger generations, to secure high-paying and stable jobs, and thus gig work becomes an option, albeit a temporary one (Li, Hu, and Jin, 2025; Hannum, 2005).

6.2 Gendered and Demographic Dynamics.

The issue of gender is imperative in determining labor market and the participation in the gig economy. Constant wage disparities, labor division, and family issues all make women more likely to perform platform-based employment (Bai et al., 2022; Iwasaki and Ma, 2020). This flexibility provided by gig work can support women in their caregiving needs and fertility-related issues, but it is also accompanied by the decreased income security and reduced wage-promotion opportunities within platforms (Li and Xu, 2022; Han et al., 2024).

Equally, status of a migrant is a major factor of entry in the gig economy. Internal migrants are subject to institutional problems, such as limitations associated with hukou registration, which hinder the ability to work in

the formal sector and to be covered by social benefits (Qin et al., 2016). These barriers are alleviated by digital platforms, which enable migrants to make money even when they are not in the formal labor markets. Nevertheless, such engagement tends to sustain precarity, which indicates the overlap between structural inequality and digital labor.

6.3 Structural and Institutional Influences.

These findings highlight that the entry of the gig economy and on what conditions is determined by structural factors such as sectoral allocation, ownership patterns and regulatory frameworks. The relative scarcity of wage differentials and reduced likelihood to engage in gig work is evidenced by public-sector work, which is described by uniform wagesetting and extended labour protections (Gustafsson and Li, 2000). Conversely, even private and informal sectors, which have weaker institutional regulation, propel greater participation in gig work, which is compensation of income instability and the absence of job security (Ma, 2018; Liu et al., 2000). These trends indicate that the impact of market pressures on the outcomes of labor market depends on the institutional setting and that policymakers need to intervene by implementing policies that mitigate sectoral disparities.

6.4 Implication of Digitalization.

The growth of the digital platforms has transformed the labor market by bringing on board novel kinds of employment which are not subject to the traditional gate keeping systems. Although platform-based labor allows the flexibility and additional earnings, it replicates the existing forms of inequality based on algorithmic regulation, division of labor, and a lack of worker protections (Han et al., 2024). The indication is that the digitalization has the possibility of enhancing structural disadvantages instead of decreasing them in the absence of regulatory controls, especially in regards to women, migrants, and lower bargaining power workers.

6.5 Policy Recommendations

Due to the structural and demographic aspects that compel the participation in gig economy, it is necessary to take specific policy steps. The policies need to work towards improving labor protection, equitable returns on education, and to control digital labor markets to avoid discrimination of assignments and wage punishment. Such gender-sensitive labor practices as family-friendly work practices and assistance with caregiving matters may decrease the motivations why women can solely depend on precarious platform employment (Li and Xu, 2022; Bai et al., 2022). Also, the policy of enhancing the assimilation of migrants into formal working environments would decrease the excessive use of informal and online jobs (Qin et al., 2016).

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