Labor Brokers and obfuscatory relational work in China's Manufacturing Sector

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategies used by labor intermediaries in China to navigate regulatory constraints and facilitate informal labor practices in the manufacturing sector. Drawing on Rossman's theory of exchange structures—bundling, brokerage, and gift exchange—the analysis highlights how labor brokers reconcile formal rules with capital's need for flexibility, often at the expense of worker protections.

Bundling practices blur the line between compliance and exploitation by combining legally compliant labor contracts with informal wage manipulation schemes, such as the "price difference" model, which minimizes companies' obligations for social insurance and other benefits. Brokerage structures further shift accountability, as multi-tier subcontracting distances employers from legal responsibilities, enabling them to avoid direct liabilities related to temporary and dispatched workers. Gift exchange enhances these dynamics, as intermediaries use bribery and relational work with schools to secure pipelines of low-cost student labor, whose precarious status undermines wage standards and labor protections.

Introduction

Despite the introduction of widely acknowledged pro-labor legislation in China, including the 1994 Labor Law and the 2008 Labor Contract Law, which mandate formal protections and rights for employees, these measures have paradoxically failed to increase labor's share of income and have perpetuated a persistent low-consumption problem within the country. This seeming contradiction raises a critical question: Why has China's labor-friendly legislation framework not translated into significant gains for workers, and instead given rise to continued precarious employment and low household consumption?

This paper seeks to address this puzzle by focusing on the pivotal role of the labor brokerage industry in China's manufacturing sector—a mechanism that capital employs to circumvent labor laws and regulatory constraints. Labor intermediaries, operating through multilayered networks of contractors and recruiters, facilitate the informalization of labor while maintaining an appearance of compliance with legal stipulations. By exploring this phenomenon, the study sheds light on how these intermediaries strategically restructure labor relations within factories, enabling employers to shift risks, minimize costs, and secure a steady supply of cheap labor.

The labor brokerage industry’s operations align with broader theoretical discussions around “obfuscatory relational work,” a concept that captures how intermediaries manipulate social and regulatory relationships to obscure exploitative labor practices (Rossman 2014).

The paper argues that the proliferation of labor dispatch, brokered recruitment processes, and deceptive employment practices not only undermines the effectiveness of labor laws but also locks the economy into a cycle of suppressed wages and precarious consumption. The long-standing structural reliance on cheap labor—mediated by intermediaries—prevents wage-driven growth in domestic consumption, even in an era of rising labor awareness and regulatory vigilance.

In examining the dynamic interactions between capital, labor intermediaries, and labor law enforcement in Guangdong Province from the 1980s to the 2020s, this paper thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between formal institutions and informal economic strategies in a transitional economy. By exposing the mechanisms behind these practices, the study sheds light on how structural contradictions in labor market regulation sustain inequalities that resonate far beyond the factory gates.

Method

The author conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Dongguan city, a traditional manufacturing hub in Guangdong province, one of China’s primary destinations for internal labor migration. Dongguan has long been a focal point of manufacturing and labor importation since the country's economic reform and opening up. Here, I conducted in-depth interviews with HR managers, labor intermediaries and migrant workers—most of whom are concentrated in the Bayfront[1] town—to understand the labor market condition and worker's experiences.

Changing Dynamics of the Labor Brokerage Industry in China

The private job placement agencies emerged in the late 1980s when China started the rapid industrialization, its profited primarily by charging job-seeking migrant workers fees for finding suitable positions. Before the mid-2000s, due to the large rural population in China, the blue- collar labor market was characterized by excess supply. For many migrant workers from inland provinces seeking factory work in coastal areas, finding jobs in unfamiliar cities was challenging. Thus, job placement agencies met the demand from migrant workers seeking employment.

However, many agencies engaged in deceptive practices, collecting fees without providing satisfactory job placements or even arranging interviews for jobs that were ultimately unavailable. For instance, a long-time human resource intermediary owner stated, "In the past, this industry was very unregulated, with little government oversight. A job seeker entering a job placement agency had to pay a registration fee first. During the early 2000s, the registration fee for men was 800 yuan and for women 400 yuan, as companies preferred to hire female workers. At that time, a worker's monthly salary was only 400 or 500 yuan, so the registration fee for male workers was equivalent to two months' salary. However, these registration fees were essentially fraudulent; the job placement

[1] The primary field sites of this study—Bayfront Town, Highland County (including its villages), and Riverbend County (including Pinewood Town)—as well as the company names (Swiftech, Neolink, and others), are all pseudonyms.

agencies didn't introduce jobs, they just took people to interviews, and whether one succeeded or not had nothing to do with them" [2].

In response, the government gradually strengthened regulations on job placement agencies, primarily by raising barriers to entry that excluded small-scale enterprises that might operate non-compliantly. As early as 1994, the Ministry of Labor issued the "Notice on the Management of Private Job Placement Agencies." Guangdong Province also introduced the "Guangdong Province Labor Market Management Regulations." These regulations stipulated that for-profit job placement agencies needed to register with the industrial and commercial administration departments and report their registration to the labor administration departments. Personnel engaged in social job placement services were required to undergo labor related knowledge training by the labor administration department and obtain a "Job Placement Practitioner Qualification Certificate" upon passing the assessment. However, these regulations did not have a significant impact in practice, and the barriers to entry in the labor service industry remained relatively low[3].

In 2007, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security implemented a licensing system for job placement agencies, requiring government approval and an employment intermediary license. While this elevated the barrier to entry to some extent, it did not entirely eliminate non-compliant recruitment practices.

Job placement agencies soon discovered another significant profit channel: labor dispatch. Labor dispatch involves workers signing contracts with dispatch companies and then being assigned to factories. This form of employment has become a major type of informal or precarious labor in China

[2] Interview with Boss Feng, January 10th, 2020
[3] Guangdong Province Gazetteer - Labor Volume, 2003

and other countries, as dispatched workers generally receive lower wages and benefits than formal workers.

The earliest dispatched workers in China evolved from temporary workers during the planned economy era. In the 1980s, the employment system in state-owned enterprises transitioned from the "iron rice bowl" permanent employment to a labor contract system. During the permanent employment era, state- owned enterprises would recruit some temporary workers from rural areas to address labor flexibility needs. Later, when state-owned enterprises established labor contracts, they transformed some of these former temporary workers into agency workers (Feng, 2019). In private and foreign-invested enterprises, the 1994 Labor Law and the 2008 Labor Contract Law increased the cost of direct employment, leading many companies to hire large numbers of agency workers. Under these circumstances, many job placement agencies began engaging in labor dispatch activities. These agencies would recruit workers, sign labor contracts with them, and then dispatch them to factories. Thus, recruitment and labor dispatch became the two main functions of job placement agencies.

By the mid-2000s, labor shortages began to emerge in manufacturing cities in coastal areas like Guangdong. Job placement agencies gradually lost their function of helping workers find jobs and they increasingly focused on labor dispatch. This period marked a significant shift in China’s blue-collar labor market, transitioning from an unlimited supply of cheap rural labor to a tightening labor market. People gradually stopped referring to them as job placement agencies and began calling them labor intermediaries.

This shift in China’s blue-collar labor market was due to three main reasons. First, due to economic development and the one-child policy, China’s labor force growth began to slow. Second, after China joined the WTO in 2002, export-oriented enterprises expanded rapidly, with labor demand growth far exceeding labor force growth. Third, the seasonal instability of industrial orders exacerbated seasonal labor demand growth, further intensifying recruitment difficulties for some enterprises.

In short, as China's labor market tightened, finding a job became increasingly easy for workers, to the extent that companies often had to compete to recruit workers. At this point, the role of labor intermediaries shifted from helping workers find jobs to helping companies recruit workers, and they began charging fees to companies rather than workers.

Most labor intermediaries primarily engage in labor dispatch and recruitment activities. The 2008 Labor Contract Law also regulated labor dispatch, stipulating that intermediary agencies engaged in labor dispatch must have registered capital of over 2 million yuan. The "Administrative Measures for Labor Dispatch Licensing" issued in 2013 and the "Interim Provisions on Labor Dispatch" issued in 2014 further stipulated that labor dispatch agencies must obtain a labor dispatch license, making the regulations more operationally enforceable.

In 2018, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security introduced the "Interim Regulations on Human Resources Market," requiring recruitment agencies to obtain a "human resources license." Consequently, most labor brokers now possess two licenses: a labor dispatch license and a human resources license. The government's routine supervision of the labor brokerage industry is primarily implemented through the verification of these licenses.

The number of Human Resource Service Agencies or labor intermediary companies grew rapidly since the mid-2010s, jumping from 25200 in 2014 to 63000 in 2022, which is more than a doubling of the number of companies. And the revenue also increased from 1180 billion in 2016 to 2500 billion in 2022.

Employers, seeking cost-efficiency and flexibility, often outsource recruitment to “first-hand order” or “tier-one” contractors. These contractors then further delegate the task to “second-hand order” or “tier- two” contractors. At the final tier, “tier-two” contractors directly hire recruiters with strong social networks with potential workers. This multi-layered structure creates distance between employers and temporary workers, allowing employers to avoid legal and financial responsibilities associated with direct employment.

For tier one contractors, not only is it necessary to have the ability to directly receive factory orders, but they also need to obtain two licenses: a labor dispatch permit and a human resources service license[4]. Obtaining a labor dispatch permit is much more difficult than obtaining a human resources service license. For tier two contractors, the process is much simpler, as they only need to obtain one license.

The decision for factories to outsource recruitment is often driven by a complex set of economic and practical considerations. Firstly, as mentioned in the earlier section, the labor market for unskilled workers has been tight since the mid-2000s. Recruiting workers in a short time period is very challenging for factories. The other more important reason is that the factory orders fluctuate (See figure for the order fluctuation of iPhone), so the factories don’t want to maintain a large labor force when there are no orders. By outsourcing the recruiting to the contractors, they are not responsible for those temporary workers. So in this way they can reduce labor costs. And by using contract workers, they also don’t need to pay social insurance or other obligations to workers. As one labor broker clearly stated, “Without us, the factory’s orders simply couldn’t be completed. It’s very convenient for the factories to outsource the hiring to us. For instance, if there’s an order that requires two

[4] See, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2013, “Measures for the implementation of Administrative Licensing for Labor Dispatch”

hundred workers, we can provide them immediately. But if they try to find people on their own, they would need to start recruiting two weeks in advance.[5]"

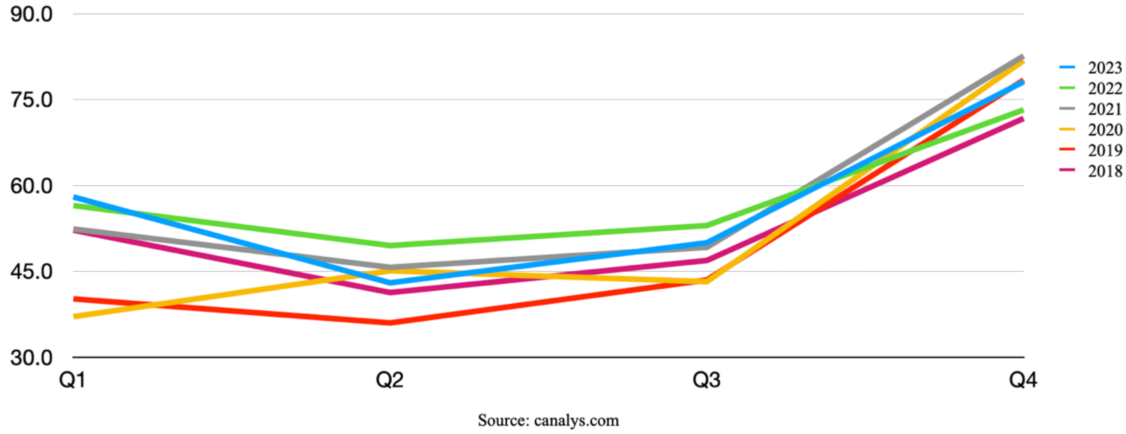

Figure 1. iPhone Global Shipment, Millions of Units

At the same time, workers also benefit from the services provided by labor agencies. These agencies offer centralized access to job opportunities, allowing workers to compare conditions and wages across different factories with ease. Additionally, some labor agencies offer advance payments to workers and transportation assistance to the factory site. More importantly, some temporary workers may enjoy higher wages than regular workers. By cashing out workers 'social security contributions, workers can enjoy a higher income.

The structure of the labor brokerage industry

In this section, I explore how the recruitment system operates within the labor brokerage industry. The description of the structure of the labor brokerage industry is based on my interviews with 15 individuals working in both the upper and lower tiers of the industry. During my fieldwork in China, I developed friendships with 4 lower-tier labor brokers and 3 upper-tier labor brokers. For these 7

[5] Interview with Zhang Zhiming, November 20th, 2021

individuals, I conducted multiple interviews with each, engaged in frequent casual conversations during my fieldwork, and visited their recruitment offices several times.

The labor brokerage system is generally organized into three layers and involves three main players: the employee, the employer, and the subcontractor. Employers frequently turn to several labor contractors, known in Chinese as “一手单” (or first-tier contractors), to help with their recruitment needs. These contractors, in turn, pass the recruitment orders to lower-tier contractors, called “二手单” (or second-tier contractors). After that, the second-tier contractors hire recruiters who typically have personal connections with potential workers. They use these connections to find and recruit employees. This process outlines how the system typically operates.

First-tier contractors usually need to have labor dispatch permits and human resources licenses to accept recruitment orders from employers. Often, these companies must front wages for workers before they can start. Sometimes, employers require labor companies to pay a deposit to begin the recruitment process.

This can create financial barriers for entering the industry. Once first-tier contractors obtain recruitment orders from factories, they may set up their own recruitment teams or outsource these orders to second- tier contractors. Generally, second-tier contractors do not hold labor dispatch permits; while some may have human resources licenses, many do not. These lower-tier contractors are typically small, often comprised of just a few people, who then subcontract their recruitment work to crew leaders. These crew leaders rely on personal connections to find workers. Overall, this three-tier structure is the standard way labor intermediaries operate, although variations with fewer or more tiers also exist. In summary, aside from a few large companies that directly manage their recruitment teams, most organizations rely on layers of outsourcing to recruit workers.

Seen from the perspective of employers, one might wonder why they choose to use labor companies for recruitment. What benefits do they provide to businesses or factories? Research on dispatched workers in China indicates that one of the main reasons for using dispatched labor is that their wages are often lower than those of regular employees. Studies of state-owned enterprises and the automotive sector show that these industries typically offer better employee benefits; workers in state- owned companies often enjoy higher pay and more privileges. Many companies in sectors like automotive manufacturing also provide generous salaries due to larger profit margins. To cut costs and increase flexibility, these businesses tend to use dispatched labor. However, in industries such as electronics, even regular employees often earn low wages, with many making just the minimum wage. My own research has shown that the pay for dispatched workers and regular employees can be quite similar, and sometimes dispatched workers might earn more than their regular counterparts. So why do companies continue to rely on labor companies for recruitment? There are three main reasons.

First, while dispatched workers may earn slightly more than regular employees, employers are not responsible for contributing to social insurance and housing funds (known as "五险一金") for these workers. Rather, these costs are typically transferred to the intermediary companies. Labor laws require employers to provide these benefits to their employees. However, when companies utilize dispatched labor, the responsibility for these benefits shifts to the labor agency. In most cases, these dispatch companies do not fulfill their obligations. As one dispatch company owner candidly stated, "According to labor laws, our labor companies often do not comply. The law says we must provide social insurance for employees, but in reality, nearly all labor companies skip this. If we did pay these benefits, we would end up with no profit. If you expose these practices, you complicate many operations. In general, which company hasn't skirted regulations?" […] "Does the labor bureau not know about this? They are aware but lack the capacity to enforce compliance effectively. If they were to conduct thorough inspections and insist that both dispatched and regular workers receive social insurance, it would likely push companies to relocate.[6]"

The second reason is that using labor dispatch gives employers more flexibility. Factories can hire workers during busy times and let them go during slower periods. As a human resources manager at a factory that produces mobile phone coating equipment explained, "Workers are becoming more aware of their rights, and one advantage of using outsourced labor is that it helps reduce risks. Many employees are not hesitant to challenge the system; even small issues can lead them to seek help from the labor bureau. If a factory wants to fire a worker, they simply inform the intermediary. Any problems related to compliance are not the factory's responsibility, since the worker's contract is with the intermediary[7]." The manager also shared her experience at a previous company, "At my last job, we faced significant difficulties because of employee terminations. Our boss had a short temper and often fired employees without hesitation. Those who were dismissed would sometimes block access to the HR office or even approach the labor bureau for arbitration, leading to considerable costs for the company.[8]" This indicates that when employers fire employees without good reason, it can lead to a lot of issues, like protests from former staff. That's why many companies prefer to outsource their labor management and recruitment to intermediary agencies. This approach not only helps them manage risks and costs but also gives them more flexibility in labor management.

By relying on labor intermediaries, businesses can effectively transfer much of the legal risk associated with employing workers. As the dispatch company owner I mentioned earlier noted, "As workers are more confident in standing up for their rights, companies are more often passing their

[6] Interview with boss Deng, August 2nd, 2022
[7] Interview with HR manager at HC company, December 2nd, 2021
[8] Ibid.

responsibilities on to us in the labor brokerage industry. To be honest, what are labor service companies for? Are we really afraid of you causing a fuss? If we were scared of trouble or conflicts, we wouldn't be in this business. We're here to deal with workforce issues."

The third reason, closely related to the second, stems from the instability of orders in the electronics industry, particularly from global brands like Apple. These companies typically place orders in August and September, and only then do suppliers receive their orders. To minimize costs, Apple's contract manufacturers and supply chain vendors are reluctant to employ workers when there are no orders. Consequently, they only recruit workers when orders are received, leading to an "acute employment" problem where factories need to find a large number of workers in a short period, often just one or two weeks.

For instance, the HR manager of Swiftech, an Apple contractor specializing in cable connectors and headphones, told the media: "The company's regular domestic workforce is 200,000. During peak seasons, we need to recruit over 500,000 workers. However, the high mobility, high turnover rate, and high cost in the blue-collar job market have always been the biggest pain points for corporate recruitment[9]". This "acute employment" issue is not limited to large factories; smaller ones face similar challenges during peak seasons. As mentioned earlier, a company producing mobile phone case coating equipment with just over 100 workers experiences significant recruitment difficulties during peak seasons. The HR manager explained, "Recruitment is very difficult. Factories can't recruit directly. They offer a basic salary of over 2,800 yuan, far exceeding Dongguan's minimum wage, and their overtime pay is 3 yuan higher than the statutory rate per hour, but still can't find workers. We set up recruitment points at the factory gate, but no one came to look. We also

[9] People's Daily, oversea edition, 直播带岗，带出就业新选择 [Live streaming brings new employment options], May 10th, 2023. Accessed May 11th, 2023

participated in government-organized job fairs, but hardly anyone showed up – less than 5 people in a day. We can only recruit through human resource companies[10]".

This HR manager even believes that the existence of labor agencies further exacerbates the factories' recruitment difficulties. She complained, "All the workers are snatched by labor intermediaries. There are more than a dozen large and small labor agencies near our factory. Some companies complain to the government, asking them to drive these intermediaries away. But, on the other hand, we all use these intermediaries to recruit people, so we have a love-hate relationship with them[11]".

The challenges related to labor scarcity and recruitment difficulties have periodically appeared in the news media over the past 20 years. This situation is due to both a decrease in the workforce willing to work in factories in China and the significant fluctuations in company orders. In short, it is impossible for companies to recruit a large number of workers in a short time relying solely on their own efforts.

So, how are labor intermediaries able to recruit a large number of workers in a short time?

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, labor companies can extend their recruitment networks into potential workers' social networks through multi-level outsourcing. For example, many labor company recruiters are respected figures in their villages and can directly send recruitment information to workers when needed. It would be too costly for factories to establish such an extensive network of labor recruiters directly. Labor companies, however, can spread the cost by providing services to multiple factories. As one previously mentioned first tier labor broker, Boss Deng, said, "We've established channels where foremen can directly contact workers and recruit

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[10] Interview with HR manager at GD company, December 3rd, 2021

[11] Ibid.

immediately. For instance, if a factory needs 100 people, I have 50 recruiters, each finding two or three people, then we filter out some unsuitable ones. Enterprises definitely can't achieve this[12]".

Boss Deng's labor company, headquartered in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, recruits for local electronics and auto parts factories. In recent years, he has developed long-term cooperation with over 30 second-tier companies from different major labor-exporting regions, including Henan in the north and Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan in the south. Each second-tier company has dozens of recruiters. Thus, his company can quickly recruit workers from different parts of the country. Boss Feng, based in Dongguan, Guangdong, is in a similar situation, mainly providing labor for Dongguan's electronics factories. After 2015, as recruitment became increasingly difficult in the labor intermediary industry, Boss Feng proactively went to more remote areas like Guizhou and Yunnan to develop labor resources, finding local partners to help with recruitment[13]. Through this method, labor intermediaries can spread their recruitment networks across the country.

Secondly, to attract workers under conditions of intense competition, labor companies offer various services. The most common methods are providing transportation services and advance wage payments. Boss Deng continued, "If a factory recruits a person who's on the train, will they go to pick them up? No. But in our case, as long as the worker confirms they're coming, I'll go pick them up. Or I'll transfer a few dozen yuan for them to take a taxi[14]". Another human resource company owner mentioned, "If workers need money, they can overdraw next month's salary. Factories would never give workers advance wages, but we intermediaries can[15]."

[12] Interview with Boo Deng, August 2nd, 2022
[13] Interview with Boss Feng, July 8th, 2022
[14] Interview with Boo Deng, August 2nd, 2022
[15] Interview with Boo Xu, November 1st, 2020

Making a profit in the labor brokerage industry

Labor companies face significant challenges in generating profits. Firstly, one of the primary reasons that factories or employers use labor agencies is to reduce costs, so they are naturally reluctant to pay substantial fees to these agencies. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the barriers to entry in the labor brokerage industry are low, resulting in intense competition among agencies. Thirdly, and most importantly, for blue-collar workers, especially unskilled or semi-skilled ones, China's current labor market is tight. This means that labor supply cannot meet demand. We have already analyzed the current state of China's labor market; in short, it is no longer like the 1990s and early 2000s when there was an unlimited supply of cheap labor. Therefore, to recruit workers, labor intermediaries must offer relatively high wages to attract employees. However, once they pay relatively high wages, their profit margins become very slim. Consequently, labor companies face a dilemma since reducing costs makes it more difficult to recruit workers. The following analysis focuses on how labor companies resolve this dilemma; that is, how do they manage to recruit workers while also making a profit.

The first strategy employed by labor companies is the "back bonus" strategy. This approach involves promising employees an additional bonus after working for a certain period, usually three months, typically amounting to half a month's or even a full month's salary. For example, the renowned contract manufacturer Foxconn frequently uses this back bonus recruitment strategy. In the latter half of 2022, due to China's pandemic control measures, many workers were unable to enter large cities for work.

Foxconn's factory in Zhengzhou, Henan, faced recruitment difficulties. To attract workers, labor intermediaries promised that workers who completed three months of work would receive an 8,000 yuan bonus. This 8,000 yuan was the back bonus. Meanwhile, workers' regular wages were set at the local minimum wage, which, including overtime pay, only amounted to 3,000 to 4,000 yuan per month. Thus, the high back bonus attracted many workers to Zhengzhou's Foxconn. However, employees could only receive the back bonus if they completed the full three months; if they didn't, they couldn't get this bonus. In recent years, many companies have used this strategy, especially those fulfilling Apple's orders, as Apple's orders are highly unstable and typically come in large volumes only in August and September. At this time, Apple's contract manufacturers need to recruit a large number of new workers to meet the orders. They then pass these recruitment orders to labor companies, which use the back bonus strategy to recruit workers. This approach ensures that most workers complete three months of work. Additionally, it helps reduce costs since, if workers don't complete the three months, the labor company doesn't have to pay the high back bonus, which then becomes the labor company's profit.

However, this strategy has its problems. Many employees, seeing that they need to work for three months to get the bonus, are unwilling to take the job. Many workers don't want to stay at one factory for such a long time. Some workers are also concerned about being deceived or not receiving the bonus after completing the work, so they don't trust the labor company's advertisements. Many employees prefer to have their wages settled monthly. In response to this situation, labor companies have introduced the "price difference" model.

The so-called price difference model means that workers' regular wages are calculated based on the minimum wage, that is, the government-mandated minimum wage. This results in workers receiving relatively low monthly wages. Then, the labor company provides additional subsidies to the workers. These subsidies are calculated hourly, that is, at an hourly rate. For example, a labor company might promise an employee an hourly wage of 25 yuan. This 25 yuan consists of two parts:

one part is the employee's formal wage paid by the factory, which might only be 18 yuan per hour. The difference between 25 and 18, which is 7 yuan, is the so-called price difference. The remaining 7 yuan is paid by the labor company. The factory transfers this money to the labor company, which then transfers it to the workers. The hourly rate that the factory transfers to the labor company is higher than 25 yuan, for instance, 30 yuan, of which 5 yuan becomes the labor company's profit, shared among various participants in the labor company. Therefore, an employee needs to sign two contracts: one labor contract with the factory and another agreement with the labor company.

The advantage of this model is that, on one hand, it can circumvent labor laws and other relevant regulations regarding dispatch workers, as these employees have signed formal labor contracts with the factory and are regular employees. On the other hand, it can also help factories save costs, as these employees' wages are calculated based on the minimum wage. Consequently, the social insurance and housing fund contributions that companies need to pay are much lower. According to relevant Chinese laws, the social insurance and housing fund that factories pay for workers account for about one-fifth to one-quarter of workers' wages. Therefore, the lower the workers 'wages, the less social insurance the factory needs to pay. At the same time, by providing additional allowances to employees through labor companies, they can still attract workers. This resolves the recruitment dilemma.

However, due to the intense competition among labor companies and the limited rural labor force, they compete fiercely when recruiting. Sometimes, to recruit workers, labor companies offer workers the highest possible wages to attract them. This means they have almost no profit. In this situation, labor companies have adopted various supplementary methods to generate profits.

The first method is to profit by encouraging employees to resign. Generally, the price difference promised by labor companies is only paid on the 15th of the month after working for a full month. This means they require workers to be employed on the 15th to receive the price difference. If a worker resigns before the 15th, say on the 7th, they cannot receive the price difference for the period from the 16th of the previous month to the 7th of the current month, and this price difference is then pocketed by the labor company. In other words, a worker will always have at least half a month's price difference that they cannot receive. Therefore, at this point, labor companies are more inclined to encourage employees to resign. This creates a situation where the interests of factories and labor companies are not quite aligned. Although due to automation and worker deskilling, factories are not very concerned about employee turnover rates—a slightly higher turnover rate doesn't matter much for productivity—if it's too high, it still doesn't align with the factory's interests. However, labor companies actually hope for a slightly higher employee turnover rate, because only if many people resign before the 15th can they obtain more profits. For example, a labor company owner in Dongguan, Guangdong, said, "60% of workers only work for one and a half months before leaving, because this is the pattern of people nowadays. I've been in the labor industry for so many years, and this is a basic rule. Because working in factories is quite monotonous, and the quality of these people is also relatively low. [...] Using this model, if the retention rate is 40%, meaning 60% of people resign within a month, there's money to be made. If you want to make more money, you need to find ways to force some people to resign voluntarily. For example, maintain a good relationship with the team leader, find fault with them for no reason, yell at them during work, and force them to resign[16]."

[16] Interview with Boss Meng, July 10th, 2022

So sometimes, the employers, that is, the factories, don't really like this model because a turnover rate that's too high still disrupts factory production.

Another method is for labor companies to recruit at zero profit, but to generate profits by selling bedding and other daily necessities to employees. For example, Boss Hu from Guizhou provides workers to many companies in Guangdong, Sichuan, and other places. To recruit more workers, he recruits at zero profit, giving all the wages provided by the factory to the workers. But "After the interview, we tell employees that the dormitory is far from here, and those who need bedding should register quickly. After registration, we quickly have people deliver the bedding. We can make fifty yuan per person[17]." In this way, labor brokerage companies can still obtain considerable profits.

The two methods mentioned above are considered relatively standard, meaning they don't obviously violate any laws. There are other strategies that involve using some deceptive and illegal means. For instance, wage deductions. As Boss Hu mentioned, some labor companies, "When the factory gives an hourly rate of 25, the labor company can offer employees an hourly rate of up to 27 yuan. After the employees arrive, money is deducted for meals, accommodation, and insurance. After all the deductions, only 21 yuan is left[18]." This method carries higher risks because it involves deception. The labor company doesn't clarify the deductions during recruitment, and employees only learn about these deductions after entering the factory or even at the time of wage payment. This method is generally used by some less formal, smaller labor companies. It often leads to strong dissatisfaction among employees, and sometimes employees may even resort to violent means against the labor company owners. For example, media reports disclosed that in 2022, an incident occurred in Dongguan where an employee stabbed a labor intermediary owner to death due to wage deductions.

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17 Interview with Boss Hu, December 6th, 2020

18 Interview with Boss Hu, November 23rd,2020

Another method involving deception is achieved through multiple transfers between labor companies. For instance, Labor Company A recruits a group of workers in one area, promising an hourly wage of 24 yuan, and then sends them to another city. When the employees arrive in that city, they are received by Labor Company B, who says the actual wage is 23 yuan. Many employees, due to the long distance traveled, reluctantly accept the lower wage. This method

also faces significant risks and is unsustainable. Employees certainly won't use this labor company again in the future. Additionally, labor companies can collude with factory management personnel to deduct workers' wages by claiming they violated certain disciplinary rules. This generally occurs in small factories where management is not very standardized.

Targeted Recruiting Strategies

Another important aspect to consider is the source of workers recruited by labor agencies. Generally, within the labor brokerage industry, they categorize the recruited workers into three types, using their terminology: social workers, migrant workers, and student workers. Let's examine these three types of workers in detail.

Workers from society (社会工) refer to individuals recruited by labor intermediaries through storefront recruitment offices on the streets or via online platforms in industrial zones, economic development areas, and other factory-dense regions. These workers are called "Workers from society" because they come from the broader society. Typically, recruitment is conducted by setting up offices in areas with high concentrations of factories or workers. With the rise of short-video media and the internet, labor intermediaries also recruit through online channels. In essence, these recruited employees are quite random and scattered. There isn't a strong relationship between the employees and recruiters. Often, many of these employees have just resigned from other factories, and many inherently lack stability. From the perspective of the labor industry, social workers are considered to have higher mobility. Some labor companies prefer to recruit social workers, particularly those companies that profit from encouraging worker turnover, as mentioned earlier. After recruiting these workers, they are aware that these employees have higher mobility. Compared to other methods, this approach is relatively easy for centralized recruitment, as a large company can directly set up booths on the street to recruit people—they can recruit anyone they see by handing out advertisements. Therefore, labor companies using this method are generally larger, with several big companies in each region adopting this approach. Some large companies even have branch offices in different parts of the country. The labor industry is quite fragmented, but even in this fragmented industry, labor companies using this method are generally more concentrated.

Another type of worker is called peasant workers, referring to workers directly recruited from rural areas by foremen. Some of these workers have previously worked in urban factories, resigned and returned home for the New Year, and then are recruited back to the factories by foremen the following year. Others are people who have never worked outside their hometowns before, such as younger individuals or older people who had always been engaged in farming in rural areas. Labor intermediaries collectively refer to them as migrant workers. In the view of those in the labor industry, this group of people is considered to have more stable work patterns and lower turnover rates. Because these people start looking for jobs before entering big cities, they generally hope to work steadily. Moreover, these people usually come to work in urban factories with relatives and friends, and individuals are less likely to resign easily. Workers recruited in this way cannot be managed using the method of encouraging resignation that I mentioned earlier. Labor intermediaries do not encourage these workers to resign but hope they will work for at least a few months or even a full year.

The remaining type is student workers, which can be further divided into two categories. One category consists of current students, usually from technical schools or vocational colleges, who enter factories to work under the name of internships through school-organized programs. These are called interns. Interns are not protected by labor laws as they are not considered real workers, so their wages are very low, often below the minimum wage, sometimes only about half of what regular workers earn. The other situation involves students who enter factories to work during summer or winter breaks, or who have just finished high school or middle school entrance exams. Generally, these are not organized by schools, so they are not mandatory. They are usually introduced to factory work by recruiters who pose as relatives, friends, or classmates. This situation is generally referred to as summer jobs or winter jobs. Since these students can only work in factories for about three months at most, they have high mobility. There are different legal interpretations regarding whether these students need to sign labor contracts. Some sign labor contracts like formal workers, some only sign short-term part-time employment contracts despite doing full-time work, and in many cases, no contracts are signed at all. Holiday workers are mainly used from June to the end of August when most vocational schools, high schools, and universities are on break, coinciding with the peak order period for many enterprises, thus meeting the labor demand of enterprises. At the same time, because these students flood the labor market in large numbers for a short period, it also lowers workers' wages. Sometimes there's even an oversupply of student workers, so often these holiday workers still earn less than other non-student workers. Vocational schools are the main source of these student workers and holiday workers. In 2023, China's vocational schools admitted 1.625 million students in a year, with a total enrollment of 4.395 million students[19]. Of course, there are some better vocational schools where students can truly learn skills, and their internships are formal, primarily aimed at learning and practice. However, based on my interviews with numerous labor intermediary bosses and student workers, most vocational school interns are aimed at providing cheap labor for factories. During their internships, students engage in the same simple, repetitive work as formal workers, learning almost no skills, and generally have to work at least two hours of overtime every day.

For factories, interns are a very high-quality source of labor. Firstly, these interns have very low wages, generally only half of that of formal workers or even less. Secondly, since these interns are still students with little social experience, they are generally very compliant with factory management, and teachers from their schools accompany the interns to assist with management. Therefore, many factories actively recruit interns. At the same time, since interns need to be organized uniformly by schools, factories must have the cooperation of school leaders to recruit interns. Moreover, many of the factory's legally ambiguous management practices also require school cooperation. Thus, establishing stable relationships with school leaders becomes very important. Usually, the establishment of these personal relationships involves illegal activities such as bribery. To avoid risks, factories usually don't contact schools directly but establish connections with schools through labor intermediaries. This also transfers the legal risks of using student workers and bribing school leaders to the labor intermediaries. In the labor brokerage industry, bribing school principals can be said to be an open secret. During my interviews with several labor intermediary bosses, Boss Niu voluntarily mentioned, "I've done many such things (bribery), putting bank cards in mooncake boxes during the Mid-Autumn Festival[20]". The reason labor intermediaries are willing to take legal risks to bribe is

[19] Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2023 Annual Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Human Resources and Social Security
[20] Interview with Boss Niu, August 29th, 2022

because of the huge profits from student workers. Boss Niu continued to mention that in a recent school project he was working on, the profit from one student worker for a month was 1,800 yuan, about one-third of a worker's monthly salary. These profits are shared between the school and the labor company. Generally, a school can send out several hundred or even over a thousand such students at once, so the profits are substantial. Due to the many advantages of student workers, some enterprises even use them as their main source of labor. For example, the HR manager of a well-known mobile phone manufacturing company in Dongguan said, "Our company generally maintains about three to four thousand student workers, with a minimum of around 1,000 and a peak of over 10,000. We currently have over 10,000 workers, with a peak of 40,000 employees in the past[21]."

The phenomenon of factories abusing student workers has long attracted social attention, and media reports occasionally mention factories' misuse of student workers, but the media generally blames labor intermediaries for this. The government has also tried to regulate the use of student workers by factories more strictly, but it hasn't had a substantial impact. Instead, the use of student workers has become more widespread over the past decade. In 2016, the Ministry of Education issued the "Regulations on the Management of Vocational School Student Internships," clearly stating that the essence of student internships is educational activities and cannot be for profit. It also stipulated that interns cannot exceed 10% of the total number of employees. However, these regulations were not strictly implemented. In 2021, the regulations were revised again, clearly stating that "student internships must not be organized, arranged, and managed through intermediary agencies." However, labor intermediaries have found ways to circumvent this. For example, Boss Meng said, "After this regulation was issued, we labor intermediaries indeed can't directly sign agreements with schools

[21] Interview with Ma Shihao, January 18th, 2022

anymore. In the future, schools can only directly interface with enterprises. But the matchmaking function of labor intermediaries is still there. Labor intermediaries just facilitate their cooperation. We can sign agreements with enterprises, and enterprises commission labor intermediaries to help them cooperate with schools, so enterprises need to pay us service fees. Schools cannot commission labor intermediaries, but enterprises can[22].” Boss Feng also mentioned, “Now we just can’t sign contracts with schools, but factories dare not give money to schools, and they don’t have channels to establish connections with schools. So our function hasn’t changed[23].”

In conclusion, for blue-collar workers in the manufacturing industry, labor intermediaries have developed various methods to recruit workers, adopting different approaches for different worker sources. The recruitment of student workers is more compulsory, while the recruitment of social workers capitalizes on their high mobility for profit. At the same time, for migrant workers with low mobility, labor intermediaries can still find ways to profit.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the historical development and present dynamics of labor intermediaries in China’s manufacturing sector. Through the lens of Rossman’s theory (2014), which highlights the structures of bundling, brokerage, and gift exchange as mechanisms to obscure contentious exchanges, this conclusion synthesizes the ways labor brokerage facilitates the continued informalization of labor practices in China.

Labor brokers employ Rossman’s bundling strategy by intertwining legitimate and illegitimate practices, thereby creating plausible deniability for regulatory violations. For example, intermediaries

[22] Interview with Boss Meng, July 11th, 2022
[23] Interview with Boss Feng, July 8th, 2022

often secure proper licenses to provide human resource services, but bundle this legitimacy with exploitative labor dispatch arrangements. Labor agencies leverage tactics like the “price difference” wage model, where companies appear to comply with labor laws while shifting extra compensation to informal subsidies. This obfuscation enables firms to minimize costs for legally mandated contributions, such as social insurance and housing funds, while maintaining compliance in appearance.

Brokerage, as conceptualized by Rossman, is central to the intermediary system. By serving as the legal and logistical link between employers and workers, brokers act as buffers that shield factories from direct accountability. Factories outsource their recruitment needs to labor intermediaries, which in turn distribute responsibilities across multi-tiered networks. This fragmented structure enables companies to benefit from hyper-flexible employment while distancing themselves from workers, circumventing legal requirements such as caps on temporary or dispatched labor. Meanwhile, brokers also facilitate legally ambiguous practices, such as circumventing bans on direct school agreements to source low-wage student interns. By assuming formal responsibility for these arrangements, labor brokers obscure exploitative labor practices under the guise of compliance.

Finally, gift exchange is evident in the relational work deployed by labor intermediaries to sustain their operations. For example, brokers maintain relationships with vocational school leaders through informal gift-giving and bribery, offering mooncake boxes containing bank cards as a gesture of goodwill during holidays. These exchanges not only reinforce personal ties but also mask the underlying transactional nature of the arrangement. Through similar strategies, brokers offer upfront services to workers, such as transportation assistance or wage advances, reframing these as acts of benevolence despite their instrumental purpose of securing worker compliance and loyalty.

Viewed through Rossman's synthesis of "nothing but" reductionism and "hostile worlds" moralism, labor brokerage in China exemplifies how contentious exchange practices persist by embedding themselves within socially and legally ambiguous structures. These intermediaries reconcile the competing demands of formal legal systems and the flexible, exploitative logic of capital. As a result, capital gains uninhibited access to a cheap, disposable workforce, informalizing labor markets and undermining regulatory reforms intended to protect workers.

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