

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



The ethos of Chinese capitalism: lessons from the career paths of Shanghai white-collar workers

Gilles Guiheux

Correspondence:

gilles.guiheux@univ-paris-diderot.fr
CESSMA (UMR 245), Université Paris Diderot, Sorbonne Paris Cité, Case courrier 7017, 75205 Paris Cedex 13, France

Abstract

This paper considers the issue of labor and labor regimes in China from a micro angle. It aims at identifying how individuals in today's China relate to work and labor after the « thirty glorious years » of booming economic growth. The analysis of changing attitudes to work and labor takes up the notion of strategy, considering that individuals in a given social environment have the capacity to promote their own personal interests and take action to increase their gains or benefits. Listening to the discourse of a group of white-class workers, the Chinese capitalism ethos appears to be close to how social scientists have described Western capitalism, wherein employees are autonomous, flexible, creative and individualistic. At the same time, this survey shows that, beyond complying with this ethos, individuals are able to make choices. The white-collar workers we met set down clear requirements when it comes to choosing a job. Employment should advance their personal development, but should not be to the detriment of other aspects of their lives. In today's China, while industrial workers are fighting for decent salaries after decades of marginalization, white-collar workers are also making new demands of their employees in terms of the quality of their jobs and lives.

Keywords: China, White-class workers, Middle-class, Labor, Career, Job-hopping, Personal development, Autonomy, Life-style, Shanghai

Introduction

The academic literature on labor issues in China has extensively discussed the diversification of labor regimes in the last thirty years. Compared with the socialist period (1949–1978), economic reforms have restructured employment and created an increasingly complex landscape. The industrial state-owned sector is no longer dominant. Service industries account for a growing share of employment. Rural workers (*nongmin gong*), previously confined to the countryside by the household registration system (*hukou*), have poured into urban areas to form a new working class. Labor regimes today can basically be placed on a scale between two extremes depending on the firm's type of ownership (public, collective, private, national or foreign), geographical location (western, eastern or central provinces), size and industry. At one end of the scale, employees still enjoy high wages and benefits. In some cases, especially in state-owned enterprises and administrations, the *danwei* system remains in use and some state-owned and foreign-owned enterprises continue to provide high wages and benefits

with a high level of protection against risks (retirement, illness, etc.). At the other end of the scale, working conditions can be highly precarious. In small, private, sometimes foreign-invested, labor-intensive firms, disorganized despotism is particularly pronounced (Chan 2001; Chan and Zhu 2003; Lee 1999). In the case of enterprises that house workers on the production premises themselves, what Pun and Smith call the “dormitory labor regime” (Pun and Smith 2007), there is no long-term relationship between the enterprise and its employees (unlike the paternalistic labor control methods) and no concern with labor force reproduction (single workers are housed, but not families). The constant turnover of young, predominantly female workers makes this regime a unique factory system.

Research first focused on blue-collar workers and the new factory regimes replacing the declining *danwei* system (See for instance Pun 1999). More recent studies address white-collar workers: sales clerks in department stores, hotel employees, professionals such as engineers and lawyers and semi-independent workers such as insurance agents (Lee 2007a; Otis 2008). The main themes of these studies are the decline of the state authority in the workplace, alienation of workers, gender identities and the flexible meanings and experiences of “localism”, “community” and “class” (Lee 2007b). Most analyses imply that the main driving force behind the transformation of Chinese labor regimes is the globalization of capitalism, with China joining the world economy and playing the disciplined, well-trained workforce card. Spring 2010 may be considered to be a turning point when a series of strikes and large worker protests started in the South of China, in Foshan, Nanhai and Shenzhen, all in Guangdong province. This led to significant wage increases for workers and a challenge to the development model. Since then, a great deal of academic research has focused on workers’ growing activism, the forms of mobilization for rights and wage increases, and the role of NGOs (Friedman and Lee 2010; Butollo and ten Brink 2012; Yang 2015).

This paper considers the issue of labor and labor regimes in China from a micro angle. It examines the opinions of workers and the way people relate to work today after the “thirty glorious” years of booming economic growth. A widespread cliché in today’s China is that different generations have distinctive attitudes to work. Those born in the 1970s, now in their 40s, the first generation to have started working in the post-reform era, are supposed to be hardworking and willing to accept long working hours. The generation born in the 1980s, however, now in their 30s, is reputedly less flexible, more resistant, and not willing to work as hard. The youngest generation, born in the 1990s, now in their 20s and newcomers on the job market, are supposed to be so highly demanding in terms of working conditions and wage expectations that they are prepared to renounce work and live off their parents. This echoes what was said about the youngest generations arriving on the labor market in France in the mid-1970s, also after thirty years of rapid economic growth. In a pioneering book entitled *The Allergy to Work* (Rousselet 1974) published in 1974, Rousselet concluded that young people were turning their backs on work, rejecting its previous place in society. He posited that work had lost in value in the late twentieth century, not in favor of laziness, but other forms of fulfilment: leisure activities, studies and family life. Other values besides work were then emerging. Work was no longer key to the construction of an individual’s social identity, but was seen merely as a necessity to live. Decades later, there is an ongoing debate among sociologists over the importance of work in contemporary western societies, where an increasing proportion of the

population does not work because they are retired, studying or out of work due to a high level of unemployment.

This paper aims at identifying how individuals in today’s China relate to work and labor. It is less a sociology of labor than an analysis of changing attitudes to work and labor, an analysis of changing ways of life. We focus especially on the alternatives to the hegemonic forms of employment and lifestyles. Our analysis of changing attitudes to work and labor takes up the notion of strategy, considering that individuals in a given social environment have the capacity to promote their own personal interests and take action to increase their gains or benefits.

Individuals’ opinions and attitudes to employment are addressed by 14 exploratory interviews with eight women and six men born between 1970 and 1987 and aged from 28 to 45 years old at the time of the interview (2014 and 2015). Informants were identified on the basis of recommendations from the researcher’s friends and acquaintances. Interviews lasted 45 min to two hours. At the time of the interview, all respondents lived and worked in Shanghai and perceived themselves as white-collar workers and members of the middle-class, on the basis of their level of education, occupation and earning power. They had all attended higher education – two interviewees had three years of vocational training (*dazhuan*), six had a bachelor’s degree and six had a master’s degree – and some of them had studied abroad. Most of them (9) were salaried employees working for either an international (7) or a Chinese (2) firm. Four were independent professionals. One was the head of his own private company. Their main source of income was derived from work. Although some owned one property - their home - or even more that they rented out, they did not make a living off their property. And despite highly valued market credentials and skills, they did not wield significant economic or political power (Table 1).

Table 1 The 14 interviewees^a

Reference ^a	Date of birth	Age (2015)	Gender	Highest degree	Type of employment (at the time of the interview)
I1	1973	42	F	vocational	Employed by a multinational company
I2	1970	45	M	master	Independent professional (architect)
I3	1979	38	M	bachelor	Employed by a multinational company
I4	1982	33	M	bachelor	Independent professional (advertising)
I5	1978	37	F	vocational	Employed by a national company
I6	1982	33	M	bachelor	Head of his own company
I7	1986	29	F	master	Employed by a multinational company
I8	1985	30	F	bachelor	Independent professional (advertising)
I9	1987	28	F	master	Independent professional (architect)
I10	1980	35	M	master	Employed by a multinational company
I11	1984	31	F	bachelor	Employed by a multinational company
I12	1986	29	F	master	Employed by a multinational company
I13	1983	32	F	bachelor	Employed by a multinational company
I14	1982	33	M	master	Employed by a national state-owned company

^aIn the text, informants are referred as I1 to I14
Source: author’s survey

The paper starts by analyzing macro data on employment statuses in today's China before moving on to the survey data. The collection of professional career stories is used not only to identify how actors move from one state of employment to another, how they seize opportunities on the job market and how they deal with difficulties, but also to identify how they interpret their actions. The biographical approach points up the individuals' inventiveness and strategies on the job markets, how they make use of the normative structures imposed on them in different situations. Part two draws on the professional career narratives to reconstruct the individuals' careers. Part three focuses on the informants' subjective comments as to why and how they changed jobs, ceased to work or took on an extra job.

The evolution of employment forms over the last 30 years: A macro perspective

The commodification of labor

In the socialist period from the 1950s to the late 1980s, the Chinese workforce was divided into a privileged urban population and a rural majority sequestered in the rural areas. In cities, the state's planning system held the monopoly on work allocation, employment and wage setting. The public sector, dominated by heavy industry, was state funded and absorbed the majority of the urban labor force. Workers were members of work units (*danwei*) that assigned individuals jobs and living quarters, provided them with all kinds of goods on ration tickets (from ordinary goods such as oil, rice and fabric to luxury goods such as bicycles and sewing machines), and gave them free access to health services. *Danwei* membership was not confined to work relations. It extended into people's private lives. The influence of a work unit on an individual's life was substantial and permission had to be obtained from work units before undertaking everyday events such as travel, marriage, or having children. Through the *danwei* system, the state provided material security and superior political and social status in exchange for political allegiance. In villages, the workforce was bound to the local people's commune. The *hukou* system, established in 1958 at a time when the regime was increasingly concerned about social instability and rural jobseekers flooding into the urban areas, prevented rural inhabitants from leaving their villages despite the fact that there was not enough work for everyone and the workforce was highly underemployed.

The diversification of firm ownership in the 1980s, with the rapid development of both collective-owned and private rural industries, and the weakening of the *hukou* system, dismantling of the work unit and massive influx of foreign investment in the 1990s radically transformed the labor landscape. As the *hukou* system was being relaxed, tens of millions of underemployed rural migrants moved to coastal urban areas looking for jobs in the booming export and construction industries. Within a few years, the composition of the working class drastically changed. The revision of China's Labor Law in 1994 introduced the possibility for firms to fire employees. Millions of state- and collective-owned enterprise workers were laid off. Employment in state-owned urban units fell from its peak of 112 million in 1995 to 64 million in 2006. Collective-owned urban units were pared down from 35 million workers in 1990 to 7 million in 2006 (China Statistical Yearbook 2018). At the same time, the old system of life-long employment was officially terminated; it was the end of the 'iron rice bowl'

(*tiefan wan*). Instead of a lifetime employment guarantee, workers then faced a totally new, uncertain environment. They had to find employment on a competitive labor market. Almost overnight, traditional urban workers protected by their work units became laborers selling their manpower on the market with no one but themselves to count on for their family's survival and well-being.

The freeing of laborers was followed by efforts to institutionalize a labor market. Over the last 30 years, the Chinese government has introduced a range of labor legislation designed to regulate employment relations. All of it is founded on the notion of the market-oriented, voluntaristic and individualistic labor contract. Numerous laws and regulations have been published. The 1994 Labor Law, which came into effect in January 1995, is the legislative cornerstone of China's employment law regime and organizes the commodification of the labor force. The law applies when there is a "labor relationship" between "a person who engages in labor" and an "employing unit" or "work unit". It applies to private companies and state-owned enterprises and their employees, but excludes independent contractors, farm laborers, domestic staff and *de facto* most *mingong* workers, who have not signed any kind of formal labor contract. If workers fall within the scope of the law, they have the right to a minimum wage, rest, leave, workplace safety and social security, and access to the labor dispute resolution system. Further laws have since been passed to cover a larger proportion of the working force and improve worker protection and rights. The 2007 New Labor Contract Law, effective in January 2008, targets primarily domestic Chinese companies that do not have labor contracts and generally fail to comply with previous laws. The new law also requires employers to contribute to employees' social security accounts and sets wage standards for employees on probation and working overtime. It requires firms to give migrant workers written contracts, and contains penalties for firms that do not comply with the labor code. The aim of this law is to put an end to legal discrimination against *mingong* workers and to integrate them *de jure*, even though they are already integrated *de facto* into the labor market. The law is a major step forward in the process of the institutionalization of the labor market on which migrants have come to occupy a central place. More recently, the 2011 China Law on Social Insurance, another major step forward, establishes a system of social protection for all workers (including migrants from the countryside) to cover retirement, illness, unemployment (contributions for which are shared between employer and employee), work injury and maternity (paid by the employer only), and a housing fund to which employers and employees contribute equally.

What macro statistics have to say about the different employment statuses

Recent statistics produced by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, using international standard categories defined by the International Conference of Labor Statisticians in 1993 and known as the International Classification of Status in Employment (International Labour Organization 2003), differentiate between employees (wage and salaried workers), employers, self-employed and unpaid family workers. The indicator of status in employment can be used to answer questions such as what proportion of employed persons work for wages and salaries, run their own business, with or without hired labor, and work without pay within the family unit. These figures overestimate the share of employees insofar as self-employed individuals can only be counted if they

Table 2 Employment status of employed individuals by age and sex (2012)

	Employees	Employers	Self-employed	Unpaid family worker	Total
Total	46.2%	3.9%	47.4%	2.5%	100%
Total Men	48.9%	5%	45%	1.1%	100%
Total Women	42.7%	2.5%	50.5%	4.2%	100%
16–19 years old (M + W)	59.9%	1.4%	35.3%	3.4%	100%
20–24	65.5%	2%	29.3%	3.3%	100%
25–29	61.8%	3.6%	31.9%	2.8%	100%
30–34	56.1%	5.3%	36.2%	2.4%	100%
35–39	50%	5.4%	42.2%	2.4%	100%
40–44	43.8%	5.1%	48.5%	2.6%	100%
45–49	42.2%	4.7%	50.6%	2.5%	100%
50–54	36.5%	3.6%	57.8%	2.1%	100%
55–59	25.6%	2.6%	70.1%	1.7%	100%
60–64	13.5%	1.8%	82.7%	1.9%	100%
65+	7.5%	0.9%	89.7%	1.9%	100%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Zhongguo renkou he jiuye tongji nianjian 2012, China Population & Employment Statistics Book 2012*, Beijing, China Statistics Press Zhongguo tonji chubanshe, 2013, pp. 160–161

have registered with the departments of industrial and commercial administration (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2013).

Table 2 shows that half of the working population in 2012 was made up of salaried workers and half were self-employed. This is due to the importance of the agricultural sector, as 47% of the population still lives in the countryside. Not surprisingly, a slightly smaller percentage of women than men are salaried. The proportion of self-employed workers increases with age, probably due to the fact that the youngest rural generations have left the countryside to work in cities whereas the older generations have remained.

Table 3 only covers urban workers. In urban areas, self-employment is one-quarter of employment. In a mature economy such as France, less than one-tenth of employed persons are unwaged workers: (Lurton and Toutlemonde 2007) in 2011, 11.6% of the labor force was unwaged and 60% of them worked in the non-agricultural market sector (Source: Insee-Dares). In Europe in 2013, the average share of unwaged workers was less than 16% across all the countries with the highest level recorded in Italy (25% in 2013). In China, the real figure of self-employment is probably higher since the figures do not take into account part-time jobs, jobs without a contract, temporary jobs or any unregistered situations.

Obviously, statistics do not say anything about what produces such a high level of unwaged workers: part of these individuals may be entrepreneurs with higher earning potential than if they were waged and they have actively chosen to be unwaged, and

Table 3 Employment status of urban employed individuals (2012)

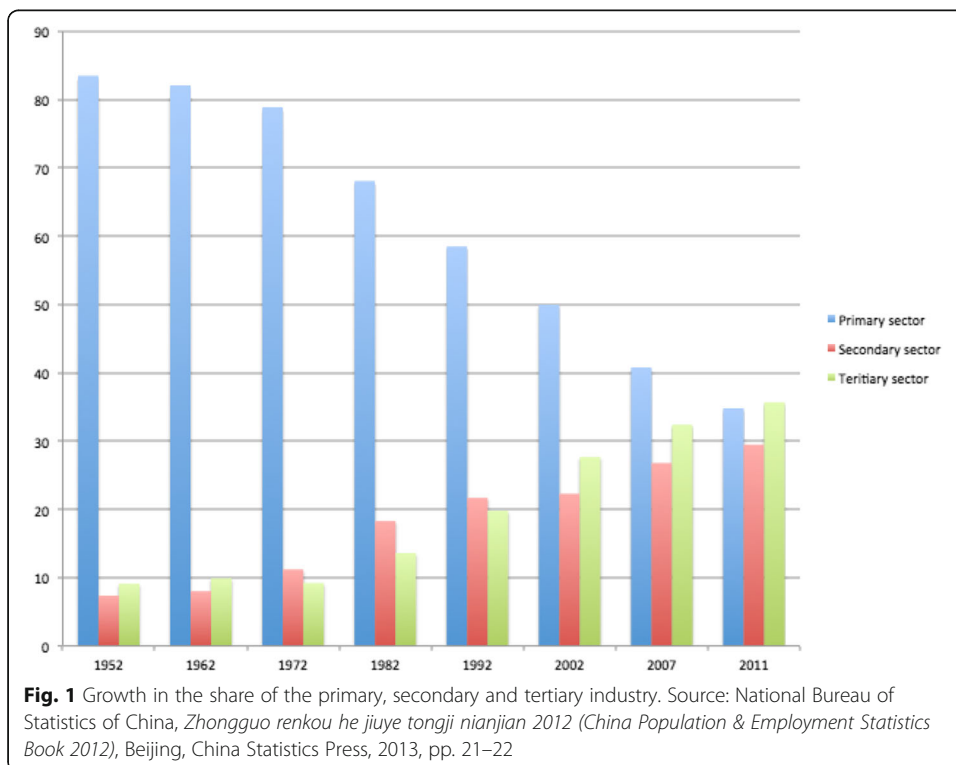
	Employees	Employers	Self-employed	Unpaid family worker	Total
Total	67%	5.7%	24.6%	2.7%	100%
Total Men	67%	6.9%	25%	1.2%	100%
Total Women	66.9%	4.2%	24.1%	4.8%	100%

Source: 2011 Labor Force Survey, in National Bureau of Statistics of China, *Zhongguo renkou he jiuye tongji nianjian 2012 (China Population & Employment Statistics Book 2012)*, Beijing, China Statistics Press, 2013, pp. 164–165

part of them may be unwaged by default, not having found a wage-earning job. Self-employment can be perceived either as a survival strategy for those who cannot find other means of raising income, or as a sign of willingness to be entrepreneurial and work for oneself.

Part of the story of the evolution of employment in China over the last 30 years is the casualization of employment. This element helps explain the number of self-employed individuals. The increasing casualization of employment is a consequence of a number of trends. The most important factor is the restructuring of employment away from manufacturing and the growing share of the tertiary industry. Unlike old industrialized countries, China has always had a relatively small percentage of the labor force employed in the manufacturing sector (Evans and Staveteig 2009). The share of the manufacturing sector (secondary industry) has grown steadily over the last 30 years, but the tertiary industry has grown at a much faster rate since the early 2000s. A majority of the new jobs are created in services such as in health services, catering and hotels. The service industry is also the least regulated and the hardest to regulate. The increase in jobs in the service industry also means a rising proportion of informal jobs (Fig. 1).

Another factor is a deliberate state encouragement for self-employment. This was already the case in the late 1990s when state-owned enterprises started massively laying off workers. In order to solve the problem of increasing unemployment, central and local authorities not only hoped that the private sector would hire laid-off workers, but they also encouraged *xiagang* to start their own enterprises (Guiheux 2007). More recently, mass entrepreneurship (and innovation) has risen up the agenda. During the March 2015 session of the two national assemblies, for instance, Premier Li Keqiang,



encouraged “mass entrepreneurship”. Later, at a news conference, he stated that, “The government must eliminate roadblocks and pave the way for entrepreneurship.” (大众创业万众创新:你我都是中国经济增长新引擎,2015年03月05日 n.d.) He added that the government also needed to foster more favorable conditions, especially for small and medium-sized businesses, and offer preferential policies for student entrepreneurs.

Although macro statistics give an idea of the different forms of employment in the workforce (employees, employers, self-employed and unpaid family workers), they say nothing about why and how individuals move from one category to another. It is these category changes that we call strategies. They are spread out over individual professional careers and can only be understood by conducting qualitative interviews and collecting professional career histories.

Career paths of Shanghai white-collar workers

The interviews asked informants to state not only the different jobs they had held – whether waged or self-employed, full-time or part-time – but also to give the time lapse between two jobs (and, if appropriate, what were they spending their time on), and say whether they had paid work beside their main job.

Change of employer

Our informants’ working career spans range from just a few years for recent graduates in their 20s to more than 15 years for the oldest individuals. None of them had worked exclusively for a single employer. All had changed their employment status or employer at least once. None of our informants had ever been formally fired by an employer. They had all voluntarily changed jobs, resigning from their positions. None of them ever mentioned finding it hard to find a new job. One, informant I12, who started working a few years ago, did mention that it had been hard to find her first job just after graduating from university because her salary expectations were rather high. She is not the only case of young graduates having to adjust their wage expectations. Depending on the industrial sector, some interviewees even mentioned how easy it was to find a new position. A number of them had been approached by a competitor or headhunter. Several mentioned sharp wage raises either between two positions in different companies or within the same company (sometimes two-digit increases annually). One, informant 7, had a very short job experience that had lasted just a few days. Born and raised in Shanghai, she had accepted a position in Beijing, a city where she was a stranger. After a few days of going to the office, she decided to give up and flew back to her home city.

Informant 5 graduated from high school at the end of the 1990s and then paid for a six-month vocational training program in fashion design. She found her first employer “very easily”, a small firm that she quit a few months later. She said that finding a job is not something to worry about. In her first 18 months of employment, she worked for three different employers. Her longest engagement was just six months.

“I can find a job within a week. I am young and, if I am not happy with my job, I quit. I can stop working and, when I run out of savings, I start looking for another job.”

Beyond the diversity of the situations, the fact is that all our informants have changed job at least once.

Job-hopping is not a new phenomenon in China, especially when it comes to highly skilled white-collar workers. Twenty years ago, in the mid-1990s, with foreign investment growing fast, the demand for white-collar workers extended beyond the available pool of skilled labor. As Laurie Duthie puts it, “Multinational corporations began competing for young executives by offering dramatic increases in salaries, as well as tuition for Master of Business Administration programs, training abroad, and money for home mortgages. Job-hopping became the quickest way to improve one’s standard of living, and many executives changed companies at almost an annual pace. ‘Job-hopping fever’ was the topic of many newspaper and magazine articles, as well as a common point of conversation in corporations.” (Duthie 2005) Job-hopping may have slowed down, and salary increases may not be as high as they were before, but there is still quite a number of opportunities open to white-collar workers.

Job-hopping is not a feature of the white-collar job market alone. A 2009 survey of young people aged mainly 18–30 (Ariga et al. 2012) found the sample of individuals to be highly mobile. Job quits and relocations are frequent and closely correlated. And job hopping is highly productive in that it generates an increase in the monthly wage. Data show that individuals’ wages increase as they change jobs over their career. Compared to first-job salaries, fifth-job wages are an average 88%, 97%, 68% and 67% higher for graduates from academic high school, vocational high school, high school drops outs, and middle school respectively (Ariga et al. 2012).

Blurred boundary between salaried employment and self-employment

Another interesting feature of the professional career narratives we collected is the blurred boundary between salaried employment and self-employment. Individuals may move from salaried employment to self-employment and back to salaried employment, depending on the economic situation. Informant 6 works in information technology services. He worked for two companies for eight years before setting up his own firm and is considering the possibility of going back to being a salaried employee one day. Informant 4 had worked for three different firms and was working freelance, as an independent entrepreneur, when we met. He is now back to salaried employment. Informant 5 worked for three different firms before setting up her own private business, which folded, and going back to working for a large corporation.

We found this same pattern in previous research on one specific sector: real-estate brokers (Guiheux and Zalio 2010). A feature of the profession is the frequent changes from employee status to self-employed status (or being one’s own boss), and vice versa. All of those we interviewed started out first working as salaried employees. Later on, some set up their own businesses. For instance, Sun first worked as an employee from 1997 to 2001 and then, after four years of experience, decided to set up his own company and become his own boss. It is not so much that individuals can be either employees or self-employed, but that they frequently switch from one status to the other, in both directions. For instance, Fan started working as an employee in 1997, set up his own company in 1998 and then went back to salaried employment in 2000. In the case of Han, within a period of ten years (from 1998 to January 2008), he switched four

times from self-employed status (either as an independent broker or an associate in a partnership) to work for four different companies as an employee. In the case of real-estate brokers, we identified the sector's structural factors enabling boundaryless careers: low barriers of entry in terms of qualifications, small capital requirement, and lax legal regulations.

The boundary between employment and self-employment is becoming increasingly blurred in many other sectors. The new labor models in part of the urban job market in China — as in many other countries — feature a fading distinction between salaried employment and self-employment. Creative industries are another area in which careers are boundaryless and status hybrid (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), with the same individual successively (or possibly even simultaneously) employed by a company and self-employed. This is the case with one of our informants, informant 3, who is a salaried employee for a large foreign multinational corporation and has his own private business at the same time — he sometimes even takes leave from his formal employer to deal with his informal (meaning not officially registered) private business.

This is not a feature specific to China. It has been pointed out by Alain Supiot, for instance, with regard to today's capitalism (Supiot 2000). The situations of large corporate employees and self-employed workers are growing closer. The employee is no longer necessarily a cog in a highly hierarchical organization. Employees are shifting into what Supiot calls “autonomy in subordination”, while the self-employed are in a situation of “allegiance in independence” (Supiot 2000). The constraint does not disappear, it is internalized. According to Supiot, an increasing number of employees work in circumstances that do not significantly differ from the situation of a self-employed individual working for a contractor. Contrary to what he describes in the case of Western capitalist countries where this evolution is somehow imposed to workers, the Shanghai white-collar workers interviewed seem to have more decision power on their situation.

Blurred boundary between working and not working

It is not just the boundary between salaried employment and self-employment that is becoming increasingly blurred. Informant 4, in between two full-time jobs, works “informally” for a friend's firm: although he does not have a legal employment contract, he goes daily to his friend's company office for a while. Informant 9, between two full-time jobs, is jobless for three months. But that does not mean she is without a job. As an architect, her previous employer still asks her to work on specific projects (*xiangmu*). She works sometimes at home, sometimes at the firm's office. Her work schedule is actually not so different from when she was salaried would also work sometimes from home.

Even for full-time salaried employees, the difference between home and office is becoming blurred. Informant 10 works for a large multinational company and the nature of his job means that he can work from home. As he puts it,

“The enterprise is flexible. I can work from home. In the end, the work has to be done. One of my team members often works from home, though keeps in contact with other team members by phone. Myself, I work one or two days a week from home.”

Informant 8, who is in the advertising industry, is the most striking example of this feature. She is based in Shanghai, but when she has no orders, she travels around China

and abroad, visiting friends and places. She explains that she remains constantly in touch with her former and potential future clients. She uses online social networks and posts pictures and drawings that are actually for sale. So, as she sees it, it is hard to say when she is working and when she is not. She sums up her lifestyle saying she is “working and traveling around at the same time” (*yibian gongzuo, yibian zou*). For this individual, there appears to be a great deal of porosity between professional and private life.

Side jobs and side incomes

A last feature of our informants' career paths is the frequency of side jobs and side sources of income. Two who speak a foreign language occasionally work as a translator or interpreter (finding their clients either through personal connections or online advertisements). Two of them have had or still have a shop on the largest Chinese e-commerce website (Taobao), in both cases in expensive imported products to which they have privileged access through personal connections or due to their frequent travel abroad. One, who graduated from a business school, occasionally lends a hand as a consultant to small private entrepreneurs within her social network. In particular, she helps them draw up proper compliant financial statements – required mainly by financial institutions such as banks – with which they are not familiar. Side jobs may or may not be related to their main job. Informant 1 has a private psychological counselling practice in addition to being a full-time employee of a multinational. Informant 2 is a full-time architect who has invested in a restaurant with friends. Informant 3 is an engineer who has private clients in a business connected with his main line. A number of them, in addition to their main source of income, have side income from capital investments in real estate, stocks, private lending through on-line application and small enterprises.

At a time when short-term employment contracts are on the increase, new labor models in part of the urban job market in China — as in many other countries — are showing signs of a fading distinction between salaried employment and self-employment, and between employment and unemployment. Boundaries are increasingly fuzzy between main and side jobs, salaried employment and self-employment, employment and unemployment, and work and leisure. Service industry professions are an example where careers are boundaryless and status hybrid (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), with the same individual successively (or possibly even simultaneously) employed by a company and self-employed. We could even argue that the narratives describe an activity that is entrepreneurial in that employees behave like self-employed individuals who learn skills (knowledge in a specific field or command of a pool of clients, for instance) through their different positions and employers and carry these skills from one employer to the next. This is not specific to the Chinese white-collar worker labor market and has been identified as a specific feature of employment in advanced economies (Lallement 2010).

What may be specific to the Chinese case is the ease with which individuals navigate between different situations and statuses. As mentioned earlier, there is a legal framework, but its enforcement varies from one locality to another, from one industry to another, and from one type of firm to another. For instance, it is well known that Chinese firms have many ways of evading their social contribution obligations in order to increase the net income of their employees, whereas foreign firms have to comply strictly with regulations. The prevalence of side jobs is also related to the fact that individuals,

if they have the necessary skills, can provide a paid service without being formally registered or having a license. When they need to submit a formal invoice (when clients need one), it is fairly commonplace to borrow a friend's license or formal registration. The lax regulation of business activities allows for flexibility and individual strategies.

A second feature of the Chinese case is the strong embeddedness of career paths in social networks. For instance, social obligations appear to be an important motive for multiple jobholding. Informant 12 graduated from a business school. Although she has a full-time job, she occasionally lends a hand to small private firms based in the small town where she was born and where her parents have a private business. These are small family-run businesses not familiar with accounting regulations and they need her help to draw up proper financial statements. These occasional collaborations come to her through her social network in her home town. She also has another side source of income: she often travels abroad for a current employer and takes the opportunity to buy foreign cosmetic products, which she then sells on the Taobao e-commerce website once back in China.

Furthermore, career trajectories cannot be explained without differentiating life cycle effects from generation effects. When individuals are embarking on their professional careers, the choice to work part time, freelance or be jobless can be considered as a step in their professional career before securing a full-time job (Vultur 2010). Young adults at the start of their careers may accept this form of employment as a short-term experiment or a trial-and-error tactic. A short period of time without a job while devoting themselves fully to interests or hobbies can be considered as a time of experience accumulation before fully entering professional life. This is the case with informant 4: after graduation, he worked for a year and a half as a salaried employee before switching for six years to another company in a completely different industry more in line with his personal interests. At the time of the interview, he was working freelance on specific projects and spending his time on his passion of photography when he had no orders from personal clients. At 33 years old, he is single and neither owns a property nor has a mortgage. In a situation where finding a job is not an issue (there will always be job offers), a succession of professional experiences can be seen in a positive light. Individuals who are still single and have not yet started a family or bought a property on a 20-year mortgage may not be looking for a stable job, but for rewarding experiences and personal development opportunities. Once they start a family and have to repay a loan, they need more security and stability in terms of income. Side jobs are another example of how life cycle may constrain tactics on the labor market. Side jobs can be a pattern found among young adults who do not yet have family responsibilities, and therefore a partner or child who need attention. Yet they can also be found among soon-to-be retired individuals who are preparing for their retirement and looking for future additional sources of income. Another factor to be taken into account in explaining job mobility is that strategies are not necessarily individualistic. They may involve the parents, the spouse or even the in-laws. A number of the informants had to take into consideration their parents' support for or disagreement with their choice when choosing a job.

We can conclude from these reconstructed career paths that there is a range of forms of employment, but they tell us nothing about how these forms are perceived. They inform us as to the economic and social processes on the labor market. From here, we

need to delve deeper and look into how these diverse forms of employment are experienced and justified by individuals.

What is at stake in a job?

Two main premises emerge from our analysis of the reasons given by our informants for changing jobs, for choosing one rather than another and for leaving a position. The first is personal development: a job should enable individuals to grow, learn new knowledge and expand on their abilities. The second is the desire for autonomy. Even if individuals work for a large organization, they want to be able to be in control.

Personal development

Our informants explained that they need to see a “future” (*weilai*) with a company if they are going to stay with a firm. Yet rather than talking in terms of income and wage increases (only one informant mentioned it), they talk about career and promotion. Informant 2 explained that you need to have “promotion opportunities” to stay with a company. Informant 3 left his job because of “the lack of career opportunities” (*meiyou jihui*). Informant 4 started looking for a new employer when he realized that he had hit a glass ceiling. As a Chinese national working for an international firm, he could not reach the upper management positions and could not be promoted further within the company. Although not openly put in terms of income, building a career and having opportunities obviously implicitly means an increase in income, whether in the same firm or from changing employers.

What is openly talked about is not the monetary rewards that come with a successful career, but how it should bring opportunities to learn, grow and fit in with personal interests. Informant 3 justified the fact that he changed employers by his need for “a sense of achievement” (*chengjiugan*). Informant 4 started working on graduation for an international trade company before moving to an advertising company, not so much for the salary as his own personal interests. He is very interested in art, so advertising was more in line with his personal interests. Informant 9 resigned from her job because she “didn’t like the projects” her employer was working on. Informant 10 left his employer because he wanted to get into a new industrial sector and acquire new knowledge.

Informant 11 explained that, although she had a very stable job with a foreign multinational corporation, she decided to quit because she could not “express herself” (*biaoxian ziji*):

“I realized that at company X, it was quite difficult for me to develop (*fazhan*) personally. My wage raises were based on my seniority... [In her new company Y], my salary improves with my capacities (*nengli*). That’s what I was looking for: a stage (*wutai*) on which I could have the opportunity to show who I am (*biaoxian zeji*), to see what I am capable of (*ziji nengzuo dao shenme zhuangkuang*).”

A particular position in a firm is compared to a stage on which she can freely express herself, not only expressing abilities she has already mastered, but also new ones as yet to be discovered. A job is like an opportunity to expand in new directions not yet foreseen. Informant 13 talked about the need to “challenge myself”, to “change myself”, to

increase her capacities (*tigao geren de nengli*). She felt that jobs were chosen to learn new knowledge and receive training. “I want to change. I need to *change myself* (in English). That’s the main reason why I left that first company.”

Interestingly, personal interests are also a motive for multiple jobholding. Informant 1, for example, developed an interest in psychology for personal reasons, in order to solve personal problems. On graduating from university, she opened her own private psychological counselling service. In addition to her full-time job with an international multinational firm, she holds her own private practice on weekends, not for financial reasons, but “as a private interest”. Informant 7, who speaks French, also happens to do occasional translation work in addition to her full-time salaried job, both out of personal interest and to increase her income. Informant 14 occasionally works for a friend’s firm both to boost his income and out of his own interest, “to learn new things” (*xue xin de dongxi*).

Looking at life, including working life, from the point of view of well-being, happiness and personal development is widespread in contemporary China (Yan 2011). It echoes government efforts and official positions promoting individual responsibility, private citizenship and the need to develop the quality (*suzhi*) of individuals in a modern socialist state. Lisa Hoffman (2006) and Xia Zhang (2008), building on studies by Michel Foucault on governmentality and Aihwa Ong on neo-liberalism, have shown how urban Chinese workers have been transformed into self-sufficient subjects, revealing how job choice is actually a governance and subjectification mechanism. As in previous research on real-estate brokers (Guiheux and Zalio 2010), we argue that far from being passive, atomized individuals submissive to highly flexible labor markets, white-collar workers are, in certain circumstances, able to work out individual (or collective) strategies to build successful careers.

Desire for autonomy

The opportunity for personal development can sometimes mean gaining as much independence as possible in workload management. A pattern encountered a number of times is the refusal to work in a large structure to be able to choose among projects and have a free hand in work schedule management. A number of informants working in creative industries - I2 an architect, I4 in the advertising industry, I8 a designer/photographer working for various media and the advertising industry, and I9 an urban planner – discussed being against rigid office working hours. Informant 2, an architect heading his own business, has been able to take his independent work schedule ambitions quite a long way. His goal is of a different lifestyle far from most salaried employees (“most of my Tongji classmates talk about nothing except money and their jobs” whereas he enjoys talking about his two daughters). He aspires to independence and being the “master of his own life”. He spends the morning at home, answering emails and phone calls, or visiting sites (“the morning schedule is very flexible”) and arrives at the office only after lunch. Sometimes, he has to work at the office overnight.

Informant 4 mentioned how he enjoyed having a flexible work schedule. He is free to organize it as he pleases so long as the work is done and does not have to be at the office from 9 to 5 like other ordinary salaried office workers:

“I don’t want to do a job that needs me to be at the office from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., behind a desk, wearing a suit.”

His work schedule is organized based not on office hours, but on the projects on which he is working.

Even the office workers among the informants said that they had flexible work schedules, which gave them a sense of control. Informant 7 works 8 h a day, 40 h a week, which is the standard legal working week.

“But the working hours are not set. I sometimes have to deal with colleagues abroad, which means starting very early in the morning or finishing very late in the evening. And I am not paid overtime. But I can also stay at home sometimes to analyze a case. I don’t always have to come to the office.”

Informant 13 works standard office hours for a multinational firm, but made it clear that this is not her ultimate goal.

“I don’t want to work in an office until I reach 60 or 65. This is how many of us, in my generation, look at things. We don’t want to stay in the same company until we retire. It’s too exhausting. I hope that, when I reach 45 or 50, I can stop going to the office every day from 9 to 5. I want to become independent. For instance, become a trainer for a supply chain, work as a consultant, go to different companies that would give me different projects.”

Our informants’ desire to constantly accumulate new knowledge for personal growth and change, their need for autonomy in both time and job management, and their preference for projects all clearly echo the new management of capitalism based on the importance of personal development and individual creativity. In Shanghai, we find a relationship to employment similar to Boltanski and Chiapello’s conclusions about the transformations of capitalism in their analysis of the literature on management as a source of capitalist normativity (Boltanski and Chiapello 1995). From the 1960s to the 1990s, management changed from being hierarchical and bureaucratic to being based on autonomy, confidence and employee self-management. The two authors call this new regime of justification “*la cité par projet*” in reference to a flexible world with multiple projects taken up by autonomous individuals. The key to the new ethos of project management and network capitalism is the individual’s employability and flexibility, and the capacity to personally transform undergo change in the shift from project to project. As in the management literature, our informants are empowered and desirous to express their personal qualities in the accomplishment of their work.

Choosing a lifestyle

Choosing a job is a way of choosing a lifestyle. I12 studied hospital management at university. On graduation, she decided that she did not want to work in that field.

“I thought that being a civil servant was really boring. I thought you would learn the first year and then see your life stretching out for the next ten years. In the next two

years, I would marry and then I would have a child (...). My parents hoped I would become a civil servant, because they see it as a very stable job (*wending de gongzuo*). But I wasn't at all interested. I don't like this type of *boring* (in English in the interview) lifestyle."

In so saying, I12 articulates her choice in terms of jobs as the idea of a challenging and enriching life, not just professionally, but also as a person.

Among our informants, I4, an architect at the head of his private studio, is the clearest and most articulate about his personal career choices. Here is what he said as his justification for a different kind of work organization:

"Maybe I'm a bit of an oddball. I would never do a job where I was sitting all day long at the same desk. It's my own choice (*wo de xuanzi*). I was offered work in large companies, but I turned it down. I know all too well how large architect studios work and I don't like it (...). I don't like what is fixed, starting at 9 a.m. and finishing at 5 p.m. I am not that kind of person. I don't like that lifestyle. Unlike my friends, I don't want to buy an apartment or a car. I like to do as I wish (*suiyi*). If the workload is heavy, then obviously I'm very busy. Otherwise, I'm free to do whatever I like."

What our informant's argument illustrates, in the case of the most advanced Chinese cities, is what Pierre-Michel Menger has posited with respect to the transformation of capitalism (Menger 2003). He has shown how the artist, as a social actor with a very specific relationship to work, has become the ideal of skilled work with high added value. For Menger, artistic innovation modes are seeping into today's production world. The cardinal values of artistic competence – imagination, play, improvisation, atypical behavior and creative anarchy – have been transported to other productive worlds. Not only are artistic creative activities not the antithesis of work, but they are increasingly seen as the most advanced expression of new forms of production. Our informants' high level of commitment to their work, the extent of their work autonomy and their asserted flexibility have many points in common with the creator as an exemplary figure of the new worker.

Conclusion

It is hard to pinpoint the norm in terms of employment in today's China. Individuals are looking for security and stability on the one hand and looking to seize the opportunities created by economic growth on the other side. A standard is a product of economic, social and political processes. It is the result of a social construct built by many players. What we argue is that stable wage-earning employment far from describes the variety of forms of employment among white-collar workers in contemporary China. This is due to both the weight of the various forms of employment (formal, informal, part time, etc.) and the fact that individuals *move* from one form to another and *combine* different forms of employment. What we find is mobility on one side of the equation and multiple jobholding on the other.

At this point, what we can say with conviction is that there is a wide range of forms of employment and perceptions of that employment. Interestingly, the analysis of white-collar workers' subjective opinions does not turn up demands for better wages,

working conditions or compliance with labor laws (as is the case with industrial workers, especially since 2010), but individuals who develop strategies to increase their income and knowledge, to work in an environment more in line their personal interests and needs.

Listening to their arguments, the Chinese capitalism ethos appears to be close to how social scientists have described Western capitalism, wherein employees are autonomous, flexible, creative and individualistic. At the same time, this exploratory survey tends to show that, beyond complying with this ethos, individuals are able to make choices. Our exploratory sample is obviously restricted to a small number of qualified individuals whose qualifications give them a high level of autonomy. The white-collar workers we met set down clear requirements when it comes to choosing a job. Employment should advance their personal development, but should not be to the detriment of other aspects of their lives. In today's China, while industrial workers are fighting for decent salaries after decades of marginalization, white-collar workers are also making new demands of their employees in terms of the quality of their jobs and lives. A hypothesis to be confirmed by further studies is that for highly skilled workers, sought after by employers, what is at stake in a job is not so much its status, but its quality and the lifestyle it implies.

Funding

This research was founded by the projet Eurasemploi of the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (France).

Availability of data and materials

Original data are interviews that the author will not disclose to the public.

Author's contributions

This article is the sole work of Gilles GUIHEUX Professeur at Université Paris Diderot. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Received: 8 May 2018 Accepted: 26 June 2018

Published online: 16 July 2018

References

- Ariga, Kenn, Ohtake Fumio, Sasaki Masaru, and Wu Zheren. 2012. *Wage growth through job hopping in China*. Bonn: Discussion Paper, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA).
- Arthur Michael B and, Rousseau Denise M. (eds). 1996. *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Boltanski, Luc, and Eva Chiapello. 1995. *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Butollo, Florian, and Tobias ten Brink. 2012. Challenging the atomization of discontent. Patterns of Migrant-Worker Protest in China during the Series of Strikes in 2010. *Critical Asian Studies* 44 (3): 419–440.
- Chan, Anita. 2001. *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Chan, Anita, and Xiaoyang Zhu. 2003. Disciplinary labor regimes in Chinese factories. *Critical Asian Studies* 35 (4): 559–584.
- China Statistical Yearbook*: various years 2018.
- Duthie, Laurie. 2005. White collars with Chinese characteristics: Global capitalism and the formation of a social identity. *Anthropology of Work Review* XXVI-3: 5.
- Evans, Peter, and Sarah Staveteig. 2009. The changing structure of employment in contemporary China. In *Creating Wealth and Poverty in Post-Socialist China*, Deborah Davis and Feng Wang eds, 69–84. Stanford University Press.
- Friedman, Eli, and Ching Kwan Lee. 2010. Remaking the World of Chinese Labor: A 30-Year Retrospective. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 48 (3): 507–533.
- Guiheux, Gilles. 2007. The promotion of a new calculating Chinese subject. The case of laid-off workers turning into entrepreneurs. *Journal of Contemporary China* 16 (50): 149–171.
- Guiheux, Gilles, and Zalio Pierre Paul. 2010. White-Collar Migrants in Coastal Chinese Cities Entrepreneurs of Their Professional Careers. *China Perspectives* 4: 48–58.

- Hoffman, Lisa. 2006. Autonomous choices and patriotic professionalism: On governmentality in late-socialist China. *Economy and Society* 35 (4): 550–570.
- International Labour Organization. 2003. *Key indicators of the labor market*, 115–139. Geneva: International Labor Office.
- Lallement, Michel. 2010. *Le travail sous tensions*. Paris: Sciences Humaines.
- Lee, Ching Kwan. 1999. From Organized Dependence to Disorganized Despotism: Changing Labor Regimes in Chinese Factories. *The China Quarterly* 157: 44–71.
- Lee, Ching Kwan, ed. 2007a. *Working in China. Ethnographies of labor and workplace transformation*. New York: Routledge.
- Lee, Ching Kwan. 2007b. Mapping the terrain of Chinese labor ethnography. In *Working in China: Ethnographies of labor and workplace transformation*, ed. Ching Kwan Lee, 1–12. New York: Routledge.
- Lurton, Grégoire, and Toutlemonde Fabien. 2007. Les déterminants de l'emploi non salarié en France depuis 1970. *Documents d'études* 129, Dares.
- Menger, Pierre-Michel. 2003. *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur*. Paris: Seuil.
- National Bureau of Statistics of China. 2013. 中国人口和就业统计年鉴 *Zhongguo renkou he jiuye tongji nianjian 2012, China Population & Employment Statistics Book 2012*, 362. Beijing: China Statistics Press Zhongguo tongji chubanshe.
- Otis, Eileen M. 2008. Beyond the industrial paradigm: Marked-embedded labor and the gender Organization of Global Service Work in China. *American Sociological Review* 73: 15–36.
- Pun, Ngai. July 1999. Becoming *Dagongmei* (working girls): The politics of identity and difference in reform China. *The China Journal* 42: 1–18.
- Pun, Ngai, and Chris Smith. 2007. Putting transnational labor process in its place: The dormitory labor regime in post-socialist China. *Work Employment Society* 21: 27–45.
- Rousselet, Jean. 1974. *L'Allergie au travail*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Supiot, Alain. 2000a. Les nouveaux visages de la subordination. *Droit Social* 2: 131–145.
- Vultur, Mircea. 2010. La précarité : un concept "fantôme" dans la réalité mouvante du monde du travail. *SociologieS*. <http://journals.openedition.org/sociologies/3287>.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2011. The changing moral landscape. In *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Yunxiang Yan, Jun Jing, Sing Lee, Everett Zhang, Tianshu Pan, Fei Wu, and Jinhua Guo, 36–77. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yang, Ray Ou. 2015. Political Process and Widespread Protests in China: the 2010 Labor Protest. *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (91): 21–42.
- Zhang, Xia. 2008. *Ziyou* (freedom), occupational choice and labor: *Bangbang* in Chongqing, PRC. *International Labor and Working Class History* 73: 65–84.
- http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/16/content_19818240.htm; 大众创业万众创新:你我都是中国经济增长新引擎,2015年03月05日, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2015/0305/c1004-26643284.html>. Accessed 5 Mar 2015.

Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen[®] journal and benefit from:

- Convenient online submission
- Rigorous peer review
- Open access: articles freely available online
- High visibility within the field
- Retaining the copyright to your article

Submit your next manuscript at ► springeropen.com
