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China

Can Delivery Drivers Break Their Silence?

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Xiong Yan, the Beijing-based pseudonymous founder of the Drivers' Alliance mutual aid network, attracted widespread media attention last month when he criticized the food-delivery platform Ele.me's Spring Festival holiday bonus system. Then, in late February, he lost contact with his family, according to his sister.

With rumors of legal troubles flying, it may be useful to look back at how the working-class Xiong came to be such a lightning rod. The following article, published last October by the Chinese nonfiction platform White Night Workshop, sees Xiong telling his story in his own words. It offers a small window into his efforts and those of his comrades, however fragile, as they strive to turn a seemingly unbreakable tide.

This is Xiong's story, as told to [White Night Workshop](#). It has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Earlier today I went out to Liuliqiao, in southwestern Beijing. A delivery driver had been riding down the road, not breaking any rules, when he was hit by someone going the wrong way. By the time I got there, the traffic police had already issued their report, which said the other driver bore full responsibility for the crash. All I could do was call out two members of the Drivers' Alliance, the informal network of delivery drivers I founded and run. One of them took the injured driver to the hospital. The other returned the order he had been delivering to the restaurant.

I got into my first accident in the winter of 2018, when I'd only just started as a delivery driver. Luckily, the other driver was willing to take responsibility, and even agreed to pay me a few thousand yuan. That was enough to cover my hospital bill, though when I went to file a claim with my company's insurance company for the rest, I found the process nearly impossible to navigate. They don't pay out for any claims under 10,000 yuan (\$1,550) anyway.

I was all alone in the hospital, and I didn't want to contact my family. Most people I knew had abandoned me after my business had gone under earlier that year anyway. I was lonely and determined to make some friends, so I began adding drivers to a chat group on messaging app WeChat. After the platform I worked at slashed our per-order pay and cut our bonuses from 400 yuan to 200 yuan a week, a bunch of drivers started to vent their frustrations in our work chat groups. Then the bosses kicked them out.

A bunch of us got together and decided to make our own group in response, one in which drivers could help each other out. I made a sign, printed a QR code linked to a WeChat chat group on it, and pasted it to the back of my moped. I named it the "Drivers' Alliance." I started getting between 30 and 40 invite requests a day, and gradually one group became many. (WeChat groups put a cap at 500 members.) Currently, there are 11 chat groups in total. That's a few thousand drivers. When a driver enters a group, they get an alert that lays out my original intentions and goals for the alliance. "Aims: solidarity, mutual assistance, friendship, determination, sharing, and winning together," it goes. "No matter if you ride for Ele.me or for Meituan, for Fengniao, Shansong, Dada, or Shunfeng, we're all in the same hustle."

Beginning in March 2020, I set up accounts on short-video platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou, as well as the microblogging platform Weibo. I wanted to make short videos because I wanted to give a voice to all the things drivers wish they could say, and all the stories they wish they could tell. I want people online to hear our real voices. I also want to keep people from being taken in: I've helped drivers cheated out of their money defend their rights, and have recorded stories from people I know who've been scammed to warn others.

Many kind people have taken an interest in us. Perhaps there's no way to change the current situation. All I can do is my best to make our voices heard. As for whether or not it'll really make a difference, I can't say I'm hopeful, but it's worth a shot.

Pushing Back

I recently helped a Meituan driver defend his rights. He joined the company on Aug. 1, 2020. In mid-September he asked for some time off, and his station agreed. Then, halfway through, his boss at the station called and told him to report back for work. He needed some time to take care of things back home, though. When he returned a few days later, his boss told him they'd automatically counted him as having quit, and they weren't going to give him any of his salary.

His efforts to solve the problem through mediation went nowhere. Then I filmed a short clip and published it to Kuaishou. In just a few dozen hours, it got over 180,000 views, and the station boss quickly sent him most of his salary for the month of August. It worked because if the stations don't solve these problems, it'll affect their reputation, making it harder to recruit drivers.

I dropped out of school after the fifth grade. Everything I learned about how to solve these kinds of problems, I learned from experience.

Once, my work with the Drivers' Alliance landed me in a detention center. It was leading up to the 2019 "Double Eleven" shopping holiday, and both Ele.me and Meituan — China's two biggest food-delivery platforms — were slashing our per-order rates. Drivers were frustrated, and I sent a message to one of my chat groups suggesting we pick a district and jointly refuse to make any deliveries there: The first three days, we wouldn't take any Meituan orders; the next three, we wouldn't take any Ele.me orders. We would all put notes on the back of our mopeds saying what we were doing and why. I figured that way we could raise public awareness for our cause and get the platforms to pay attention.

The fliers weren't even passed out when the police found me. I spent 26 days in criminal detention, far more than I ever expected. Luckily our protest hadn't actually taken place yet, and it hadn't caused any real-world impact or damage. If it had, I probably wouldn't be talking with you today.

Other than that, looking after all the alliance members is quite time-consuming. But what can you do? They have hard jobs in a strange city. It's lonely. Drivers have few friends. Some have told me that they're embarrassed to even admit to others what they do. They think they'll lose face. I think it's a good job, though. We're not thieves. We work hard for our money. What's so bad about that?

Still, we're not white-collar workers. We don't spend all day in an office. They can go online and use Weibo. They have the knowledge and language to make their voices heard. Most drivers don't even have a Weibo account, and we aren't particularly good at expressing ourselves. We come from limited educational backgrounds and have limited knowledge. Take this latest controversy about the exploitation of drivers, for example. We're at the center of the whole debate, but you never hear from us directly, only others — experts, scholars and the like. It's like we're not even here.

It can feel as though we don't even have the right to speak. And even when we do speak up, no one hears us anyway. Our words just get lost in all the chatter. Then, once a given controversy is played out, everyone forgets

about us until the next time.

And ultimately, while we may complain, we still need to take orders to make a living.

Getting By, For Now

In all honesty, what drivers want is simple: higher incomes. If you limit how many orders a driver can take at once, it might make our jobs safer, but drivers will object because it limits how much they can earn. A better solution is to raise our per-order rates. I remember back in the winter of 2018, you could make roughly 8 yuan an order. As of late 2020, it's about 5.80 yuan. If drivers want to maintain their previous income level, their only option is to go all-out and increase their hours.

I don't feel "trapped by the system," as one widely read article about our plight put it. What's trapping us are the platforms' tricks. They set all the rules, and we have no choice but to play along. We're cheap labor. As far as the platforms are concerned, if one of us quits, there's plenty more willing to take his place, so they're not worried.

Anyone who's really smart won't last long in this line of work. There's constant turnover. No one really cares about all the various little rules set by the platforms, or the insurance stuff. They're just here to make some quick cash. And people's concerns vary, too. There's a fair number of drivers who just want to make an honest day's living. They're not interested in anything else. So it's hard to bring everyone together.

Nevertheless, these rules are the source of all our problems. For example, most conflicts between drivers and restaurants are because of them not getting orders ready quickly enough. The platform only gives them a suggested time frame, but there's no real limit on how long they can take. If you're a Meituan driver, however, these delays are infuriating. You have to wait 15 minutes from the moment you walk in the venue's door before you can cancel and take another order. For Ele.me, you need to file three reports before you can get out of delivering the order: one after five minutes, another after 10, and a third after 15 — and even then, they'll still fine you if you cancel.

Overtaking the fine requires an appeal. The process is a hassle, and you need to fill out all these forms. What driver has the time? It's better to just take a few extra orders. No one can afford to wait out the full 15 minutes anyway. Each order has to be delivered within 30, maybe 40 minutes. Add in the time you take getting to the restaurant, and once the 15 minutes are up, you'd never be able to make the delivery on time. That kind of thing makes drivers furious, and sometimes they get so mad, they go after the restaurant owner. That's the origin of most fights between drivers and store owners.

I used to run a restaurant, so I understand the other side. Their only job is to make a good meal. How it affects the drivers' schedules isn't their problem. I used to argue with drivers. I didn't get why they were in such a rush. Now I do.

And then there are the crazy customers. One hot summer day, someone asked me to go to a store and buy them a skirt. Turns out, the store didn't have the color they wanted, so they tried to cancel the order. I'd ridden several kilometers to get to the store, and if they canceled the order, I wouldn't be paid for what amounted to more than an hour's work. I asked them if they'd mind just paying me 10 yuan for my troubles, and they ended up reporting me to the platform. I was suspended for three days.

Another customer wrote down the wrong address — the place wasn't even on the map. I spent half a day circling the neighborhood, trying to find her building, and ended up having five orders go over the time limit, meaning I wouldn't

make anything off them. I finally found her, and I pulled up my map app and showed her the address she used didn't exist. As I was riding away, she called me and told me she was filing a complaint. Her reason? I didn't have a good attitude.

It's just overwhelming sometimes, you know? I'm 1 million yuan in debt, and I kept trying to tell myself: What does it matter if I lose another 50 yuan? Who cares? But I just couldn't let it go. I was so frustrated.

Customers can file complaints, restaurants can file complaints, and drivers are trapped in the middle. The platforms already tend to blame drivers for any problems: I would say that about 90% of complaints are substantiated. And if you want to appeal, the burden is on you to make a convincing argument. Given the typical driver's lack of education, this isn't always realistic.

An Uncertain Future

Our lack of organization makes it hard for drivers to protect their rights. To tell the truth, I used to think setting up this alliance and fighting back might help things. I don't think that anymore. I know the alliance can't change the bigger picture, and it'll never earn the right to negotiate with the platforms directly. Still, at the very least it can change the lives of the people around me. If I can do that, it'll be worth it.

A law firm once reached out to me. They wanted to work together, saying they could offer free consults to drivers. They offered other things, too. For example, if a driver is hit by a car and hospitalized, and the other party refuses to pay, the insurance company requires them to first get treated, then bring an itemized receipt to them to be reimbursed — in these cases, the law firm could help pre-pay the initial costs.

This seemed like a good idea to me, so I agreed. But I asked for something else, too: an app where drivers could go to trade or sell secondhand gear. For example, they could sell their lithium batteries, or even their mopeds. That went online in the spring of 2020.

Of course, helping others also helps me. When I help members buy or rent a battery, the factory gives me a commission, but I've never hidden that from anyone.

I still owe more than 1 million yuan. I'm paying it off slowly. I'd like to go back into business one day. A few nights ago, I met with a wealthy businessman. He wanted to go into the auto-services business with me, but I'd have to take orders from him. I declined. I like my freedom. And isn't that the whole point of our lives? To live them how we want to live them?

As told to Yin Shenglin.

Translated for [Sixth Tone](#) by Kilian O'Donnell; edited by Yuan Ye and Kilian O'Donnell.

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