From Disembedding to Digital Re-Embedding: Social Media Empowerment and Solidarity Practices of Chinese Truck Drivers

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Abstract
In China, truck drivers in the logistics industry have used social media to form various networked organizations for mutual assistance and protection of rights and interests. This study examines the organizational practices of Chinese truck drivers on social media (i.e., WeChat and Douyin). Using online communities, Chinese truck drivers have constructed a new type of solidarity that includes virtual and practical dimensions. Social media empowerment has expanded the social capital of truck drivers, promoting social integration and resource redistribution. This online self-organization provides a reference for collaborative governance among self-employed workers who want to promote professional solidarity. However, our findings also indicate that combating the exploitation of digital labor on capital platforms is fundamentally difficult for organized labor groups.

Keywords
social media, empowerment, solidarity, truck drivers, China

In April 2021, Jin Deqiang, a Chinese truck driver from Hebei Province, killed himself at a checkpoint. In a suicide note posted on a social media chat group, Jin claimed that he had been unfairly fined at the checkpoint and wanted to use his suicide to make authorities pay attention to the situation of truck drivers. After this news went viral, Chinese media outlets reported on the survival status of truck drivers and their rights and interests. Jin’s suicide also aroused attention to the challenges of self-employment that truckers face, such as the cost of buying their own truck (i.e., 300,000 Chinese yuan, the equivalent of US$47,000), unstable income, and lack of union protection.

As the logistics industry plays an increasingly important role in China’s economic development, road freight has become a primary form of employment among rural populations. As a labor-intensive service industry, China’s road transport includes 15 million trucks and 30 million truck drivers, accounting for 76% of the freight volume of the country (Chinese Truck Drivers Research Group, 2018b).

In the era of mobile Internet, new information production methods have relocated social resources, reshaped labor relations, and created new social structures. The dissemination and circulation of information in a networked society has shifted the traditional employment model (e.g., farmers entering factories to work) to one based more on self-employment. According to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (2019), 91.5% of road cargo transportation workers were self-employed and 76.8% of them were rural migrant workers. Among Chinese truck drivers, 71.2% drove their own vehicles and were self-employed workers (Chinese Truck Drivers Research Group, 2018a). Unlike traditional state-owned enterprise workers and private enterprise workers, these truck drivers are often on the periphery of the system, lacking institutional guarantee and organizational protection.

Changes in Internet technology have profoundly affected the freight industry in China. Since 2014, the Internet of Things, cloud computing, and big data technologies have promoted the rise of Internet logistics platforms, which have become the main channels for self-employed truck drivers to find goods to transport. On one hand, although the Internet...
has helped drivers connect to sources of goods, it has also compressed their bargaining space. Drivers must compete with each other for orders, and this mode of operation has kept freight rates low. On the other hand, the popularity of the Internet and smart-phones has allowed scattered self-employed truck drivers to organize themselves through the Internet. The average age of truck drivers is 37 years, and 80% of them are under 45 years (Full Truck Alliance, 2020).

Their needs for information communication, solidarity and mutual assistance, and protection of rights and interests have spurred the formation of various networked self-organizations, including the Truck Association, Truckers’ Zone, Chinese Dragon, and Northwest Wolf. These organizations publish short videos on platforms such as Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) and organize activities through groups on WeChat. Improvements in network technology have widened the space where driver groups can express opinions, introduced new channels and new means for drivers to share interest appeals (e.g., wage arrears and fighting against capitalist monopolies), and triggered new thinking about online solidarity.

While media use among truck drivers includes publishing on traditional blogs about daily organizational activities (e.g., holding a song contest, commending outstanding members, and debt collection results), they primarily use WeChat and short video platforms, the two most popular types of social media in China (Thomala, 2022). As a dominant, multi-purpose application, WeChat is integral to the life and work of truck drivers. In addition, short video platforms allow them to produce and share videos easily. For truck drivers, WeChat groups and short video platforms have different functions. Organizations use WeChat groups internally to supply information, mobilize members, maintain relationships, promote livelihood, and protest labor policies. Short videos, however, are open to the public, and the purposes are less numerous: publicity, self-display, and emotional support.

In the current study, we used the Truck Association as a case for exploring two social media channels through which Chinese truck drivers have self-organized through the Internet: WeChat groups and short video platforms. The aim was to clarify the social media empowerment of Chinese truck drivers through solidarity practices.

**Literature Review**

**Worker Solidarity**

The term “solidarity” derives from Aristotle’s (ca. 330 BCE/2014) concept of political friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Since Durkheim (2014) introduced it in *The Division of Labour in Society*, the concept of solidarity has become famous in social science (Jang, 2018). Research on solidarity continues to develop, including the collective emotion of social solidarity (Collins, 2005), rational trade-offs (Coleman, 1990; Hechter, 1988), resolving social conflicts (Coser, 1956; Parsons, 1937), and the solidarity economy (Miller, 2010). Specific to the research on worker solidarity, which refers to “the basis from which forms of collective action within and beyond the workplace can develop” (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020, p. 36), existing studies feature the perspectives of mobilization, collective action, and solidarity practice in the Internet era. For example, Kelly (1998) stated that worker mobilization is a collective expression of individually felt injustices and that worker solidarity requires an effective mobilization mechanism to promote unity among the internal interests of workers and the cohesion of forces before they can take action. In addition, Snow (2004) proposed that workers united to build three frames for collective action: focusing, articulation, and transformation. As for solidarity practice, Miao (2014) studied the labor dispute at Walmart in Changde, China, arguing that worker solidarity must have a definite social network, a core group of capable leadership, and a way to mobilize external resources.

With the development of Internet technology, on one hand, workers can form a common collective memory and a culture of solidarity through mutual sharing, learning, and motivation (Wang, 2013). On the other hand, the anonymity and lack of spatiality and density of the Internet might be counterproductive to solidarity (Bimber, 1998). Scholars have focused on labor solidarity in traditional factories and enterprises; this workplace solidarity refers to a group attitude developed in the work context and rooted in the interaction, shared experience, mutual dependency, and collective identity of workers (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Research on the solidarity practices of self-employed, decentralized workers remains limited. Thus, we raised the following research question:

**RQ1.** How does the reorganization of Chinese truck drivers generate solidarity?

**Digital Intermediation Platforms and Gig Workers**

In recent years, digital intermediation platforms have emerged in diverse fields around the world, giving rise to new types of digital gig workers (Karatzogianni & Matthews, 2020). As “a set of online digital arrangements whose algorithms serve to organize and structure economic and social activity” (Kenney & Zysman, 2016, p. 65), digital intermediation platforms offer “workers considerable autonomy over when and how often to work” (Vallas & Schor, 2020, p. 283). On digital intermediation platforms, gig workers own the means of production and participate in the platforms as independent producers (Han & Liu, 2020). Driven by digital technology, the efficiency of information exchange has improved, the supply and demand sides of the labor market better align, and the work mode has shifted from enterprise-employee to platform-individual (T. Niu, 2021). However, numerous individual difficulties have emerged in the platform work, including spontaneous overwork and meager profits (T. Niu, 2021).
Through social media, the networked population gains the goals that they cannot reach alone (Rogers & Singhal, 2003). Empowerment occurs when people collaborate to achieve the community with dignity” (Lord & Hutchison, 1993, p. 7). In addition, workers at an Ohm factory and a Foxconn factory found that workers in a Honda factory effectively realized their demands with the help of social media technology. However, workers at an Ohm factory and a Foxconn factory had difficulty controlling the direction of their actions without mutual communication and coordination.

Chinese truck drivers, as part of the working class, are primarily rural migrant workers. In China, short videos on mobile Internet platforms play an increasingly important role in the presentation of grassroots situations and interests. Liu (2018) argued that short videos had made rural daily life more visible and that rural space had entered a socialized, relational, and structured state of production. In addition, Y. Niu (2018) found that online communication, discourse exchange, and public action among rural WeChat groups integrated multiple subjects into a common field. The farmers shifted from an atomized state to a media-based co-existence, forming a consensus through public opinion. Their cooperative network became a carrier of publicity. In this case, discretized peasants formed a non-institutionalized, coordinated, and autonomous norm, a new type of social order that integrated their identities through public participation.

In studies about truck drivers, scholars have focused on work conditions and labor issues and the health and rights of marginalized groups, paying little attention to Internet technology empowerment and organizational solidarity. For example, Graham and Naftuko (2010) examined the relationship between organizational commitment and job satisfaction and found that low organizational commitment affected attitude and attention, increasing the occurrence of vehicular accidents. In his book The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream, Viscelli (2016) found that truck drivers used to be the highest-paid and most powerful group of American workers, representing the classic American image of freedom, independence, and dignity. Today, this occupation has gained the reputation of an arduous blue-collar job, regarded by some as a sweatshop on wheels. In this context, we raised the following research question:

\[ \text{RQ2} \] As a new type of digital gig worker, can Chinese truck drivers use organized solidarity as a long-term protection tool in the face of exploitation and damage to their personal rights?

**Social Media Empowerment and Practices of Workers**

Social media are “online applications and technologies that enable participation, connectivity, user-generated content, sharing of information, and collaboration among a community of users” (Henderson & Bowley, 2010, p. 239). Social media empower workers and bring new tools of power that help them break down information barriers, express ideas, and increase their ability to practice solidarity. Empowerment consists of “processes whereby individuals achieve increasing control of various aspects of their lives and participate in the community with dignity” (Lord & Hutchison, 1993, p. 7). Empowerment occurs when people collaborate to achieve goals that they cannot reach alone (Rogers & Singhal, 2003). Through social media, the networked population gains the ability to take collective action and demand social change (Shirky, 2011). For example, Wang and Meng (2013) studied the protest cases of workers in three Chinese factories and found that workers in a Honda factory effectively realized their demands with the help of social media technology. However, workers at an Ohm factory and a Foxconn factory had difficulty controlling the direction of their actions without mutual communication and coordination.

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\[ \text{RQ3} \] What is the relationship between social media empowerment and the network organization solidarity that Chinese truck drivers have established using social media methods such as WeChat and short videos?
Methods

Our primary research target was the social media practices of the Yuzhou branch of the Truck Association. Started in 2017 and headquartered in Henan Province, China, the Truck Association is a registered civil society organization with legal representatives. The association currently has more than 30,000 members, covering most of China’s provinces and cities, and has hundreds of WeChat groups. We chose this particular branch because Yuzhou is a city in central China and an important freight hub. In addition, the Yuzhou branch gained recognition as an outstanding branch of the Truck Association. The president of the branch, Wang Xiaowei, is the backbone of the Truck Association, appears frequently in news media reports, and is one of Henan’s Excellent Freight Drivers. The Yuzhou branch currently has 768 members, many of whom use short video platforms and participate in a WeChat group.

For the current study, we engaged in online network ethnography, offline observation, and in-depth interviews. From January 2019 to April 2021, with the permission of truck drivers in the Yuzhou branch, we continually observed their production of short videos, participated in their offline organization activities, and joined the WeChat group of the Yuzhou branch to observe its daily management, online operation, and rights protection. In addition, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with the branch president, WeChat group leaders and managers, and truck drivers, with an average interview time of more than 1 hr per person.

We also collected more than 30,000 voice and text messages in the WeChat group of the Yuzhou branch, over 60% of which were voice messages related to road conditions and everyday life. We then used debt collection and Jin Deqiang’s suicide as key topics, removing unclear voice messages and duplicate donation messages. In the end, we analyzed 2,361 messages related to 15 debt collection cases and 526 messages related to Jin Deqiang’s suicide.

We collected short videos from Douyin, the most popular short video platform among truck drivers. First, we selected 12 accounts with more than 10,000 likes on their homepages. Since their respective account creation dates, they had released 4,942 short videos. We then searched the introductions to identify videos related to the Truck Association. Among the 1,075 videos we identified for analysis, 23 related to Jin’s suicide allowed us to explore the public expressions of truck drivers about high-profile incidents.

Findings

The WeChat group had 12 managers, including the branch president and staff from the publicity and secretarial departments. Daily messages consisted of information about mutual assistance and rescue, routine communication, and safety reminders. Mutual assistance and rescue messages included vehicle repairs and casualty donations; routine communication included exchanges about clothing, food, housing, transportation, and marriage and love; safety reminders included various safety tips for attending to the details of driving at night. The issue of debt collection was the most common topic and featured quick resolution. We tracked 15 cases and found that 13 were successful. The fastest resolution took only a few hours, and the slowest took more than a month. The drivers were able to mobilize through the WeChat group, and the managers were able to issue commands and dispatches and conduct online claims. In addition, drivers in the WeChat group actively participated in discussions, donations, and other actions related to the suicide of Jin Deqiang, further promoting internal communication among the truck drivers.

In addition, we analyzed 1,075 short videos related to the Truck Association. Through content coding, we identified four categories (see Table 1).

We found that 7 of the 12 accounts belonged to managers of the Truck Association (e.g., president of the Truck Association and presidents of various branches), reflecting a need for decision-makers to display organizational identity on social media. The account of Wang Xiaowei, president of the Yuzhou branch, had the highest number of likes. With his high digital literacy and strong executive ability, Wang had become an image ambassador of the Truck Association. For example, Wang Xiaowei published more than 700 short videos on Douyin, most of which related to the daily activities of the organization. He attached great importance to emotional mobilization through audio-visual elements, presenting the solidarity of the Truck Association. His content included gatherings of drivers, appealing to shippers who owed money, and his injury and hospitalization after delivering free supplies to an epidemic area. The videos with the highest traffic on Wang’s short video account related to engagement in high-profile incidents. After Jin Deqiang’s suicide, the Truck Association organized donations. Wang Xiaowei rushed overnight from the Henan Province to Jin’s hometown in the Hebei Province with donations to express condolences to Jin’s wife and other family members. On April 8, 2021, one of Wang’s short videos, a conversation with Jin’s wife lasting 1 min and 45 s, had 233,000 views. He wrote the following in the short video introduction: “The moment I saw her was really chilling! I sincerely hope that this family will be well in the future, and the 30 million drivers sincerely wish the same.” Viewer comments under the short video included “You are loyal and represent the aspirations of the people across the country. How to donate?” and “Clicked Like for your actions!”

In addition to hosting videos, short video platforms such as Douyin also permit live streaming, allowing users to chat with audiences, sell products, and build their own fan base. Wang Xiaowei had opened live streams on Douyin for debt collection and for selling truck supplies, though the latter was a rare occurrence on the platform. During an interview, a public relations manager of the Truck Association talked...
Organizational Changes for Truck Drivers: From Disembedding to Digital Re-Embedding

Organizational solidarity is crucial to social change. Polanyi (1944) proposed the concept of embeddedness in *The Great Transformation*, suggesting that human economy resides in social relations. The network organization of Chinese truck drivers is an outcome of changes in social structure. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the organizational changes that Chinese truck drivers have undergone fall into three stages.

The first stage was membership in *hetero-organization* during the planned economy. From the 1950s to the 1980s, individuals did not have permission to own a means of production (e.g., freight trucks). As employees of state-owned enterprises, truck drivers belonged to various formal organizations (e.g., party organizations and trade unions) that protected their rights. The second stage was *non-organization* after market reform in China in the 1980s. The reform of state-owned enterprises led to the disappearance of a large number of truck fleets. With the rise of modern logistics, young and middle-aged rural laborers entered the freight industry. This change in the basic composition of professional truck drivers led to an oversupply of labor and vicious competition. The third stage, which started in 2014 and continues today, is *self-organization*. The motivation to build their own organization derived from four major needs of truck drivers: rescue, debt collection, bargaining, and recognition (Chinese Truck Drivers Research Group, 2018a).

Rescue needs include information rescue, accident rescue, and life assistance. Debt collection needs include asking for wages in arrears. Bargaining needs primarily concern freight prices. Recognition needs refer to professional identity. These four needs pushed the formerly unorganized self-employed truck drivers to reorganize. Using short video platforms and WeChat groups, the Truck Association, which relies on network connections, has forged an identity for drivers and provided a convenient way to organize mutual assistance for rescue, debt collection, and bargaining.

A disembedded economy is “an autonomous sphere of human activity, self-regulated through a system of price-making markets” (Rodrigues, 2004, p. 195), and disembedding is a process through which “social, cultural, and economic relations can become detached from their localized contexts as a result of modernity and globalization” (Rodgers, 2004, p. 123). We borrowed this term to refer to the withdrawal of individuals from social forms and obligations in the traditional context of domination and support. Using social media technology, almost everyone can participate in information production using networked devices, creating new social spaces and practices and allowing traditionally disadvantaged groups to promote themselves in terms of discourse, economy, culture, and social capital (Ding, 2009). Social media technology has improved the survivability of migrant workers by increasing access to occupational information, autonomy, social network participation, and opportunities for expression (Zhao, 2016). These digital practices have created a path toward re-embedding, a process of self-recognition and coordination through subjective initiatives such as creativity, imagination, and strength.

Empowerment through social media has given rise to network solidarity organizations by providing a technical environment for organizational maintenance. The short video and WeChat accounts of many truck drivers, for instance, contain identity markers of the Truck Association. The short videos they post give an authentic impression of their work activity, especially their participation in the annual meeting, rescue, and charity of the Truck Association. Followers praise the video content, which offers the satisfaction of emotional comfort and self-actualization. In addition, using the WeChat group, truck drivers have promoted their own survival through

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### Table 1. Categories of Short Videos.

| Category | Content | Motivations and needs |
|----------|---------|-----------------------|
| 1. Promote the image of the Truck Association | Official activities of the Truck Association, commendation at the annual meeting, singing competition, media reports about the association | Publicity of organizational reputation, organizational identity construction, collective honor |
| 2. Demonstrate solidarity practices | Association donation to the victims, volunteer participation in anti-epidemic activities, flood relief, debt collection | Safety, mutual aid, social status improvement |
| 3. Show participation in organizational activities | Emphasis on individual participation in the annual meeting of the Truck Association, donation activities, volunteer activities | Emotional satisfaction, self-actualization, job fulfillment |
| 4. Speak out on high-profile incidents | Commentary on the news of Jin Deqiang’s suicide, visiting Jin’s family, calling on the outside world to help recover funds | Presentation of unfair treatment of digital gig workers, interest demands, external appeals |
several practices: inquiring about access to sources of goods, calling for rescue, communicating emotions, sharing resources, and forging new paths of solidarity.

Truck Association managers commonly used phrases such as “unite” and “stands in solidarity” in their short videos and WeChat group postings. This spirit of solidarity seems to be the core driving force of network organization. For example, after the suicide of Jin Deqiang, a member of the WeChat group of the Yuzhou branch posted the following message:

The future of the Truck Association is bright; the road is tortuous. Only by building confidence and being united can we achieve the goals of correcting the chaos of the industry, protecting the rights and interests of truck drivers, and achieving the happiness of members of the Truck Association.

In line with this idea, digital re-embedding provides a new path of solidarity. Drivers in the Truck Association used social media to create network organizations for engaging in social solidarity, exchanging content related to emotion, rationality, and economics. Doing so redressed their atomized and decentralized labor situation, established an emotional community, and promoted exploration of virtual and practical solidarity practices.

Rights Protection in the Online Community: Collective Action for High-Profile Incidents

Social solidarity is a moral process in community relationship; that is, only through interaction with others can an individual engage in moral action (Zhang, 2015). To defend their rights and interests, before the large-scale application of new media technology, Chinese migrant workers often used the so-called “weapons of the weak” (e.g., suicide, public nudity) to attract media attention. In recent times, 82% of Chinese truck drivers have been withheld wages and owed freight charges, and most of these drivers have used mobile applications to find sources of goods. Among this group, 26.8% were owed 2,000 yuan to 4,000 yuan, and 11.1% were owed more than 10,000 yuan (Chinese Truck Drivers Research Group, 2019). This situation was common among drivers in the WeChat group of the Yuzhou branch.

A typical collective action of these drivers was to chase Lao Lai (i.e., “deadbeats” who intentionally avoid paying charges). Through network mobilization, the drivers engaged in several solidarity practices in the WeChat group to increase cohesion: arousing anger, emotional recognition, collective consensus, and honorary incentives. In the WeChat group, one member issued a chasing order with details about the deadbeat’s behavior: “day after day, procrastinated again and again. It has been dodged for more than a year.” After arousing the anger of the members, the group leader mobilized them to take action: “The members are at work! Call this Lao Lai’s phone number.” The group manager also reminded everyone to “use civilized language. Please remember that we are rights defenders. Don’t use aggressive words.” Most deadbeats do not answer phone calls, so drivers tend to share screenshots of their calls and texts, relaying messages such as “Fight against Lao Lai, everyone is responsible” to achieve consensus. Members often referred to “solidarity” in their discourse for debt collection (e.g., “solidarity is strength,” “Unite as one, hold with a group to stay warm,” “A strong individual is not strong enough; no matter how strong you are, you are like a sheep. A strong team is really strong; be united like wolves”).

Drivers were also tactical in their WeChat groups. One group manager negotiated with the deadbeat on behalf of everyone and recruited other drivers to build momentum: “Don’t stop. Lao Lai is discussing conditions with me. Increase effort.” After negotiating conditions, the manager issued an order in the group: “All brothers and sisters stop attacking!” After resolution of the claim, the group manager issued a red envelope, a function in WeChat that allows a user to place some money in a virtual envelope, which other users can click to claim a portion of the amount. In addition, the group manager awarded points to outstanding participants. Such honorary incentives guarantee enthusiastic participation in collective action.

We tracked 15 cases in the WeChat group of the Yuzhou branch and found that in most situations, drivers obtained information from online freight platforms but lacked contract awareness and rights protection. The amounts owed were not high, ranging from several hundred to several thousand yuan. Because legal procedures to procure such small payments are too costly, networked organizations chase debts collectively to disrupt deadbeats psychologically. After weighing the pros and cons, the deadbeats tend to pay the charges. Compared with official litigation, organizational action is more affordable and more efficient.

Lewin (1951) regarded the construction of identity as a psychological process involving individuals and society. The community of self-employed truck drivers constructed a collective identity and strengthened their resistance during debt collection. With a framework of protesters, awareness of resistance soon transformed into resistance behavior, and the debt collection procedures in the WeChat group gave rise to a ritual (C. Li & Zou, 2015). The actions taken by members of the WeChat group fully mobilized the emotional recognition and consensus of the drivers, transforming collective interest into collective action. Their media actions in cyberspace, what Collins (2005) called “ritual solidarity,” achieved practical results through emotional mobilization.

However, on a certain scale, collective phone calls and SMS attacks fall into the category of extreme behavior. Driven by new media technology, netizens who engage in online interaction are sometimes called “smart mobs” (Rheingold, 2003). Indeed, social media technology provides a mobile coordination mechanism for collective action (Zhao, 2016). During an in-depth offline interview, a Truck
Association manager mentioned that the current method of debt collection is a reluctant action rather than a welcome option and did not violate the law. They had gradually changed “recovery order” to “mediation order” and, in terms of organizational structure, changed “Recovery Department” to “Mediation Department.” In addition, they had invited private legal professionals as consultants to avoid legal risk.

The unification process of the drivers in the Truck Association embodies three stages of network mobilization: (a) the initiation stage of transforming reality into a virtual space, (b) the symbolic interaction stage in cyberspace, and (c) the transformation of virtual interaction back to real action (Lou & Liu, 2010). First, the reality of the Lao Lai debt incidents mobilized the WeChat group members to enter the cyberspace for mutual assistance and rights protection. Second, in the symbolic interaction stage, drivers communicated and interacted to collect debts in the collective cyberspace through online slogans, expressions, and red envelopes. Third, these mobilized drivers returned from cyberspace to the real world, physically gathering to strengthen the organization of the Truck Association.

In addition to the WeChat group, short videos provided a way to mobilize emotions and motivate the chasing of Lao Lai. Wang Xiaowei, the president of the Yuzhou branch, posted a short video called “Ask for help” on Douyin. Standing in front of the association’s sign, Wang Xiaowei called out loudly the following message:

Today, I represent 30 million truck drivers and ask the world for help. Who can give us a guarantee of receiving freight fees? We called Lao Lai and were accused of making harassing calls. We called the police and were told that we have to go to court to sue. Can we drive truckloads of goods and be ready to go to court at any time? Do we have that much time? I hope that media, with positive energy, will pay attention to us.

Netizens clicked on this short and emotional video tens of thousands of times and posted many comments. In addition, after the suicide of Jin Deqiang, Wang Xiaowei went to Jin’s hometown to visit the bereaved family and uploaded several short videos about his trip. Due to Douyin’s recommendation algorithm for high-profile incidents, millions of netizens watched these short videos, once again reflecting the high efficiency of online solidarity and mobilization. This social media practice further establishes an online community for truck drivers and attracts attention to their situation.

From Virtual Solidarity to Practical Solidarity: Creating a New Type of Solidarity Economy

The Truck Association drivers transcended the limitations of physical space using short videos and WeChat groups to maintain virtual solidarity, allowing even unfamiliar members to establish daily contact. In this way, even the most primitive social relationship has become a resource and method for maintaining organizational structure (C. Li & Zou, 2015). In the WeChat group of the Yuzhou branch, 80% of the members were local drivers. Their primary social relationships were with relatives and people from the same town. Daily mobilization and organization of these personnel maintained group cohesion. In addition, the Truck Association had designed a unified WeChat avatar template, membership card, clothing, and association logo. The Publicity Department launched a series of WeChat mobilizations, rolling out daily messages:

The WeChat avatar and membership card are symbols of the Truck Association members. If you use the association’s WeChat avatar, all of the goods owners and Lao Lai around the country can see your power. It is recommended that everyone use it. It is a deterrent to Lao Lai.

The virtual network gave drivers a source of unity and strength, which they projected using the virtual avatar and physical membership card.

Virtual solidarity generated a practical solidarity culture for the truck drivers in our study. They carefully chose their own action strategies based on their interests, relationships, bargaining power, rights protection risks, and life pressures. As a means of market gaming, the collective action of workers embodies market logic and confirms its legitimacy (Wang, 2013). The daily operation of the Truck Association fully reflected that market logic, and its organizational philosophy reflected its dual attributes as a social organization and an industrial organization. The freight market involves a set of interlocking components (e.g., purchase, maintenance, insurance, logistics). For mutual benefit, the Truck Association has expanded its operation to include sponsors and partners, such that truck drivers can enjoy a discount when purchasing from certain vendors.

According to the rational choice paradigm, individuals only participate in collective action when they anticipate that their personal benefits will exceed the costs (Ferree, 1992). The Truck Association’s organizational model also emphasizes the cost–benefit trade-off (Liu & Liu, 2012). As a population that integrates the dual identities and life experiences of farmers and workers, migrant workers engage in the rights protection actions of traditional small farmers and modern market players (Lai & Wu, 2011). Several managers in the Yuzhou branch WeChat group had established their own transportation logistics company in early 2020 to sell tires and trucks, provide services, and expand the local logistics vehicle business. The WeChat group leader, Wang Xiaowei, posted the following: “Other companies often have unreasonable charges. The company established by our members protects the interests of drivers in terms of insurance costs and other aspects.” However, this venture had led to some controversy. Some drivers believed that this business was a disguised use of the resources of the organization, but some drivers thought the business was a good thing: “Many drivers
need to purchase equipment and need service from transportation companies. Companies founded by drivers will not cheat us and are more secure.”

When the driver network organization of the Truck Association derived an economic chain, it also triggered the exploration of a new form of solidarity economy. According to Miller (2010), the new economic model of solidarity economy posits that people are highly creative and can find ways to solve economic problems within their social and ecological environments. In this way, solidarity economy is a process of positive and collective imagination. Solidarity economy does not try to maximize profit. Rather than prioritizing certain interests, it encourages joint efforts toward social, economic, and environmental justice.

**Inequality, Free Rider, and Internal Division: Another Side of Truck Drivers’ Solidarity Practice**

While the solidarity practice of the Truck Association has had favorable results, we identified some downsides of solidarity and some causes of division. First, we found that some ordinary drivers questioned the apparent privileges of organizational leaders. For example, one driver said during an interview,

> Now the leaders of the association have set up a transportation company, saying that various concessions are for the benefit of truck drivers, but don’t they want to make money? Once we were all drivers, but now the status is unequal.

Another driver said, “The biggest beneficiaries of the association are the organizational leaders. They use the identity as a way to communicate with the outside world and acquire social capital.”

Second, some truckers held a wait-and-see attitude toward the association, perceived as free riders who only enjoyed the benefits and were unwilling to participate proactively. During an interview, one driver explained this idea:

> The Truck Association is mainly driven by the backbone, and they regard this organization as their work. But many ordinary drivers just understand this as a chat group. When I have nothing to do, I just chat here without much sense of responsibility. There are some problems, such as the problem of platform capital, which I don’t think can be solved.

Some drivers did not want to participate in organizational activities due to concerns about interest loss. One driver offered the following complaint during an interview:

> I lost a lot of money from participating in the association’s event, and I was so pissed. In 2021, the Truck Association called to send supplies to the epidemic area in Hebei Province. We transported goods for free, and we were quarantined for 15 days when we came back, and we couldn’t do anything. I have to pay my truck loan of more than 10,000 yuan every month. Who cares about my loss? The media reported it, saying that the Truck Association’s support in the fight against the epidemic is very beautiful. But I was told that since I made a voluntary contribution, the loss of the 15-day quarantine should be borne by myself, which is unfair.

Third, the digital divide led to unequal access. During an interview, an elder driver said that he was not good at using smartphones and could not actually participate effectively in online activities. For him, WeChat group organizations and short video platforms had little effect, and online freight platforms played a limited role. As a result, many of his sources of goods were acquaintances. The experience of such drivers remains fragmented and disembedded.

Fourth, truck drivers spontaneously formed transportation companies, but successful operation was rare. Changes in the internal and external environment (e.g., poor flow of capital, unreasonable internal rules of the team, and membership withdrawal) generated significant risk, further affecting the loyalty of Truck Association members and the value generation of the organization.

In fact, the various truck driver organizations in China have both grown and split. Even the founders of the Truck Association came from other organizations. In its current form, some members of the Truck Association do not agree with the organization’s values, conflict with the organization or other members, and are likely to leave to join or establish another organization. In Henan Province alone, we learned of more than a dozen truck driver organizations. Some organizations fiercely compete for members, frustrating attempts to unite for the protection of common rights.

**Discussion**

**Social Media Empowerment: Incentives for Solidarity**

Social media empowerment certainly relates to content, but the media itself has also become an important source of power. An online social relationship network constructed by media users is itself an empowerment mechanism. Social media generate new living space, social space, and cultural space for workers, providing a support system within the processes of urbanization and socialization. In this support system, users can regulate their behavior, construct their identities, cultivate professional consciousness, obtain social capital, and even reconstruct social networks (Sun, 2019). In their online network organization, the self-employed truck drivers have constructed a solidarity discourse in digital space, formed a series of network organizations to maintain solidarity and standardized systems, and expanded offline mutual assistance space and survival opportunities to build a solidarity economy.

Aided by their media support system during resource mobilization, the Truck Association transmits information,
assists in cognitive liberation, and provides solidarity incentives. From the perspective of social capital, the network is the carrier of resources and can help actors obtain those resources to achieve goals (Cai et al., 2009). The truck drivers we analyzed broke through the boundary constraints of atomized labor and crossed the digital divide. Relying on a self-organized WeChat group and the power of a solidarity economy, they also expanded their social capital.

Through the online WeChat group, truck drivers have not only integrated information services and other resources but also helped each other, forming an online community. Driven by group cohesion and identity needs, they gained the network access of professional groups, engaged in collective action through new media, and extended their effort in the world. By fully investing in the social capital network, they have grown their relational capital, rebuilt their living space and the rules they have to follow, and gained social and media power.

**Crystallization of Network Organization: Toward Autonomous Solidarity of Professional Groups**

Durkheim (1893/2014) argued that solidarity is the process of internalizing and socializing organizational values in individuals. Solidarity refers not only to the state of aggregation of social groups or organizations but also to a process of solidification and crystallization of social groups or organizations (H. Li et al., 2006). In the digital age, more and more atomized self-employed workers have a need for organized mutual assistance. In the new model of the gig economy, many professional groups (e.g., stevedores, domestic workers, and crane operators) have not yet formed a close network organization like the Truck Association. They can all learn from this example.

Migrant workers were originally embedded in rural society by systems, rules, and cultural customs. Their migration to the city has fundamentally changed that social structure. The formation of individualized labor markets has disembedded labor relations from institutions (H. Li, 2016). In the practice of network organization among truck drivers and the like, scholars can explore a standardized management system for the autonomy of virtual communities. New media-based cooperation networks can help individual workers form a non-institutionalized, coordinated, autonomous social order that preserves personal and social identity.

**Social Integration and Resource Redistribution: Moving Toward Political Solidarity**

The network organization of the Yuzhou branch WeChat group generates solidarity in the social system. It is an intermediate organization for benign cooperation between the state and self-employed workers, between the market and self-employed workers, and among the self-employed workers themselves. This organizational innovation promotes social integration and redistribution, thereby helping a new type of professional group move toward political solidarity.

The attempts of truck drivers to defend their rights should extend beyond the success of individual cases. They must have an impact on the concepts that govern relevant systems, indirectly triggering adjustments. The competition among concepts is of great value to the rational construction of future systems (Zhao, 2016). Friedman (1978) studied the organization of truck driver unions. He argued that the reforms that reshape unions often stem from changes in their industries and that major changes in industrial production pose new challenges to unions. One way to deal with the expansion of capitalist power is to strengthen the internal organizational foundation. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions issued the *Work Plan for Promoting the Joining of Truck Drivers and Other Groups* in 2018. Under China’s current system, the intervention of trade unions means the intervention of and recognition by state agencies. This recognition is necessary for truck drivers to determine their own social status, to clarify the social form of their survival, to safeguard and protect their rights and interests, and to gain the respect of an entire society (Chinese Truck Drivers Research Group, 2018b).

By expressing their interests and participating in the redistribution of social resources, self-employed workers can improve difficult situations and further strive for social justice. The collective appeals of truck drivers and the magnification effect of their public discourse prompted governments to take their issues seriously. In addition, the online organization of truck drivers led to offline discourse and communication links with the government, media, and social institutions to explore the role that trade unions might play in the lives of the working class in China.

**Limitations of Solidarity Practices Among Truck Drivers**

Our findings suggest that organizations such as the Chinese Truck Association have played an important role in rescue and debt collection but have played a limited role in enhancing the bargaining power of truck drivers or their ability to obtain supplies. Although the Internet has improved the efficiency of drivers in finding sources of goods, it has reduced the bargaining space of drivers. Multiple truck drivers compete for the same order, keeping the freight rate down. As a result, the truck drivers at the bottom of the road freight system bear the terminal pressure of the decline in overall profits. As digital gig workers, truck drivers have precarious solidarity, often too weak to reverse the status quo.

In addition, truck drivers face difficulties in their social media practices. With the goal of collecting debts, truck drivers collectively protested in their internal WeChat group,
limiting the access of outside parties. In short videos shown to the outside world, truck drivers in need of self-actualization and identity construction appeared to beautify reality, obscuring digital gig labor exploitation. Due to the short video platform’s use of algorithms to block acute social problems, truck drivers have used their membership as a sign of social identity but have had limited success in demonstrating group plight. The attention gained by the case of Jin Deqiang’s suicide was a short-lived phenomenon. Based on our findings, stimulating the participation of the outside world in the public affairs of truck drivers and achieving social change through solidarity practice have been fundamentally difficult.

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