

A GLIMPSE INTO CHINA'S DAILY WAGE LABOR FORCE: BASED ON SURVEY DATA FROM BEIJING, GUANGZHOU, AND QINGDAO

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Abstract: The research provides a systematic empirical analysis of China's daily wage labor force based on 1,092 questionnaire surveys conducted in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Qingdao in 2023. The findings reveal a diverse demographic profile predominantly composed of middle-aged, married, male migrants with agricultural household registration (hukou), characterized by generally vulnerable economic conditions and weak family resilience against risks. Analysis of employment quality indicates that daily wage workers occupy a precarious position marked by high risk and low security, featuring job instability, high labor intensity, and extremely low social insurance coverage. The study reveals that daily wage labor serves as a "last-resort" option under structural exclusion from the formal labor market, and their living conditions reflect institutional shortcomings in the informal employment sector. Finally, policy recommendations are proposed regarding innovating social security systems and strengthening public employment services.

Keywords: Daily Wage Workers; Informal employment; Employment quality; Social mentality; Mobility

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a documentary titled *"Sanhe Talent Market"* drew public attention to the "Sanhe Youth." This term refers to a group of disengaged young people congregating around the Sanhe area in Shenzhen, who engage in daily wage work for one day and then idle for three, living without fixed abodes and leading a low-quality lifestyle. Their living conditions and lifestyle, drastically different from conventional norms, earned them the moniker "Great Gods" (Da Shen). Regarding the causes of the "Sanhe Great Gods," some commentators argue that this phenomenon represents a way for youth weary of the monotonous labor on factory assembly lines to seek freedom[1]. Others point out that the life courses of the "Sanhe Great Gods" are filled with setbacks, and they lacked the necessary social support and protection during their transition to "adulthood"[2]. A significant portion were once left-behind children in rural areas, with low educational attainment, lacking labor skills, and social capital. Although they aspire to urban life, they find it difficult to integrate[3]. In terms of livelihood, the "Sanhe Great Gods" under the "daily-pay system" are highly atomized, with their work, life, interpersonal relationships, and future expectations being extremely unstable, trapping them in a "suspended" social morphology[4]. Qualitative studies have detailed their livelihood hardships, such as having wages deducted by recruiters under various pretexts, and a lack of responsibility and trust between employers and employees[5].

Current research on the "Sanhe Great Gods" has provided a rich, concrete understanding of the daily-pay labor system and the livelihood situations of these workers. However, notable limitations exist:

First, the stereotyping of daily wage workers. While "Sanhe Great Gods" primarily consists of young male migrant workers, the daily wage labor force is complex and diverse, including not only young males but also female and middle-aged/older daily wage workers. As one study notes, beyond the "Sanhe Great Gods," China also has "Majiaqiao Great Gods" and "Xuhui Great Gods." The "Great God-ization" represents a structural shift in China's labor domain, where tens of thousands of ordinary migrant workers face the potential of becoming "Great Gods," rather than being an extremely unique group phenomenon[6]. Therefore, focusing solely on young male daily wage workers like the "Sanhe Great Gods" not only fails to reflect the basic situation of daily wage workers in China's urban casual labor markets but may also lead to negative stereotypes, such as them being disengaged ("lying flat").

Second, a lack of foundational data and systematic analysis of the daily wage worker cohort. Existing discussions on the livelihood conditions of daily wage workers rely mainly on qualitative studies, skilled at storytelling and situational analysis, largely belonging to an interpretive tradition. While often insightful, these views are difficult to falsify. The scarce use of quantitative data for systematic discussion of this group has resulted in a lack of foundational data, hindering holistic judgment and causal understanding of the daily wage labor force and the daily-pay system itself. For instance, where do daily wage workers come from? What are their gender ratios and age distributions? What is the employment quality of daily wage workers, and what factors influence it? Etc.

Against this backdrop, it is necessary to obtain foundational data on daily wage workers for a more objective and systematic analysis of China's current daily wage labor force. Accordingly, this paper, based on questionnaire survey data from daily wage workers in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Qingdao, explores the following four questions: First, what are the demographic and social characteristics of the daily wage worker group? Second, what is the employment quality of daily wage workers? Third, what is the social mentality of the daily wage worker group? Fourth, how do daily wage workers move? Where do they come from, and where do they intend to go in the future?

2 DATA DESCRIPTION

The data for this paper comes from questionnaire surveys conducted among daily wage workers in the labor markets of Beijing, Guangzhou, and Qingdao. The research team first conducted on-site observation and case interviews at Beijing's Tongzhou Majuqiao Labor Market, known as the "Number One Labor Market in North China," and the Changping Lishuiqiao Labor Market to understand the basic environment and operation of these markets. Based on this, combined with the literature review, a preliminary questionnaire was designed. This draft was then tested at the two markets and revised according to the trial survey results. The final questionnaire included four parts: basic personal and family information, mobility circumstances, employment situation, and social mentality of daily wage workers.

The research team simultaneously distributed questionnaires in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Qingdao from October to November 2023. Distribution sites in Beijing included eight major daily wage labor markets: Tongzhou Majiaqiao, Fangshan Liangxiang, Changping Lishuiqiao, Beiqijia Building Materials Wholesale Market, Yanjiao Labor Market, Fengtai Liuliqiao, and Chaoyang District Shilihe Labor Market. In Guangzhou, distribution sites included Haizhu District Textile Casual Labor Market, Liwan District Casual Labor Market, Huadu District Shiling Town Casual Labor Market, and Zhongluotan Town Casual Labor Market.

As there is no overall sampling frame for the daily wage worker population, the team used non-probability sampling methods. To enhance sample representativeness and saturation, the team first maximized the number of labor markets covered and second, paid attention to variations in respondents' age, gender, place of household registration, etc.

Questionnaire distribution considered the operational rhythm of the labor markets. Daily wage workers typically gather at labor markets around 6:00 AM daily to wait for and seek work. Those who fail to find work by around 1:00 PM usually leave. According to this work rhythm, surveyors generally began distributing questionnaires after the first morning peak waiting period and continued until noon.

To ensure quality, questionnaires were distributed and collected face-to-face, one-on-one. Upon entering a labor market, surveyors would explain the survey's goals, content, and other relevant details to potential respondents, addressing any questions. After obtaining informed consent, surveyors would lead participating daily wage workers to pre-identified, relatively quiet spots to begin the formal survey. The survey was administered via interview, where surveyors read each question and its options aloud, recording the respondent's answers. If respondents had any queries during the process, surveyors provided explanations based on unified explanations from prior training. Completing one questionnaire typically took 40-60 minutes. Referring to the hourly wage standard for daily wage labor, respondents received a 20 RMB labor subsidy upon completion.

In Beijing, 450 questionnaires were distributed, 420 were returned, and 419 were valid, yielding questionnaire return and valid return rates of 93.1% each. In Guangzhou, 350 questionnaires were distributed, 329 were returned, and 323 were valid, resulting in a return rate of 94% and a valid return rate of 92.3%.

3 DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DAILY WAGE WORKERS: WHO BECOMES A DAILY WAGE WORKER?

3.1 Gender Structure

Daily wage workers are predominantly male, but gender ratios vary across cities. In the total sample, male daily wage workers accounted for 85.1%, and females for 14.9%. In other words, the daily wage labor market is typically male-dominated. The National Bureau of Statistics' "2023 Migrant Worker Monitoring Survey Report" indicates that male migrant workers comprise 62.7% nationally, and females 37.3%. Compared to this, the proportion of women engaged in daily wage labor is significantly lower than the national female migrant worker average. Notably, gender ratios differ among the three cities: the proportion of female daily wage workers in Beijing and Qingdao is relatively close, at 7.2% and 10.3% respectively, while in Guangzhou, it is as high as 30.0%. This is partly related to the labor demand in Guangzhou's daily wage markets, which host numerous textile, garment, and leather goods factories often operating on a small-batch, multi-order, 24-hour shipment model, creating high demand for female daily wage workers.

3.2 Age Distribution

The average age of respondents was 46.9 years (SD = 10.89). The mode and median were 55 and 49 years, respectively, with a minimum age of 17 and a maximum of 71. The skewness coefficient was -0.295, and the kurtosis coefficient was -0.697. Age group data shows that young daily wage workers (39 years and below) accounted for 27.7%, middle-aged workers (40-59 years) constituted 61.0%, and older workers (60 years and above) made up 11.4%. Thus, most daily wage workers are middle-aged and overall relatively old. Young daily wage workers like the "Sanhe Great Gods" represent only a portion of this group.

It is worth noting that the average age of daily wage workers in Qingdao was 43.51 years, lower than Beijing's 49.13 years and Guangzhou's 47.70 years. By age group, the proportion of young workers (39 and below) in Qingdao reached 42%, significantly higher than Beijing's 19.3% and Guangzhou's 23%.

3.3 Household Registration Type

Survey data show that daily wage workers with agricultural households accounted for 91%, while those with non-agricultural households accounted for 9%. This indicates that not all daily wage workers are migrant workers from rural areas; some are urban bottom-level laborers.

3.4 Place of Origin

The places of origin for daily wage workers show pronounced regional clustering. Those in Beijing primarily originated from the "Four Shan-He Provinces" (Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi), mainly Hebei (30.5%) and Henan (28.4%), with Shandong (10.5%) and Shanxi (9.1%) also constituting significant proportions. Daily wage workers in Guangzhou mainly came from Hubei (49.6%), with Hunan (13.3%), Guangdong (7.7%), Guangxi (6.8%), and Jiangxi (6.5%) also represented. In Qingdao, workers primarily originated from within Shandong province itself (52.9%), followed by Heilongjiang (20.9%).

3.5 Marital Status

In fact, most daily wage workers are married and currently living with their spouse (68.9%). Unmarried workers accounted for 22.9%, while divorced or widowed individuals made up 8.2%. By age group, 55.3% of young workers (39 and below) were unmarried, compared to 10.9% of middle-aged workers (40-59) and 8.1% of older workers (60+). This shows that even among young daily wage workers, a significant portion have families, unlike the solitary existence of the Sanhe Youth.

3.6 Educational Attainment

The educational level of daily wage workers is generally low, predominantly elementary and junior high school. Data shows 4.9% received no formal education, 30.3% attained elementary school level, 42.9% junior high school level, 18.4% high school/vocational high school/technical secondary school, 2.6% college, and 0.8% undergraduate degree. Even among the young cohort (39 and below), a high 62% had education levels at junior high school or below; high school/vocational high school/technical secondary school accounted for only 28.8%, college 7.3%, and undergraduate 2.0%.

3.7 Family Economic Status

The family income level of daily wage workers is generally low. In 2022, 21.9% of families had an annual income below 10,000 RMB; 33.1% earned between 10,000 and 30,000 RMB; 30.3% between 30,000 and 50,000 RMB; 19.1% between 50,000 and 100,000 RMB; and 17.5% earned 100,000 RMB or more. Referring to the national quintile income grouping standard (Low-income group: per capita disposable income 8,333 RMB; Lower-middle-income group: 18,445 RMB; Middle-income group: 29,053 RMB)[7], and considering that most daily wage workers hold agricultural hukou (91%) and typically have larger family sizes, it is estimated that most daily wage worker families likely fall within the national low-income or lower-middle-income groups. This reflects not only their limited absolute income but also their relative position within the societal income structure.

Further analysis of family financial health and trends reveals greater economic vulnerability. In 2022, only 24.9% of families "saved some money," while the majority (55%) merely achieved "barely balancing income and expenditure to make ends meet." A significant proportion needed to "spend some savings" (12.3%) or "borrow money" (7.8%) to get by. From a dynamic perspective, family income over the past three years showed a deteriorating trend: 39.2% reported income had "significantly decreased" or "slightly decreased," far exceeding the 22.9% reporting "growth." This indicates that daily wage worker families not only have low income levels but also generally weak financial resilience against risks, with economic conditions continuing to face pressure.

Daily wage workers' evaluation of their family economic status is generally low. When asked which tier their family's economic status belongs to locally, 60.3% stated it was below the local average, 34.2% considered it average, and only 4.0% said above average. Responding to "Do you think your family is currently prosperous?", 86.9% believed it was "not prosperous."

Regarding personal income, 71.5% of daily wage workers had an average monthly wage income below 5,000 RMB over the past three months, including 20.0% below 2,000 RMB and 51.6% between 2,000-5,000 RMB. Those earning 5,000-7,000 RMB monthly accounted for 18.7%, and only 7.0% earned above 7,000 RMB. Thus, daily wage workers not only have low family income but also generally low personal income, with most failing to reach the national average monthly income for migrant workers (4,432 RMB) published in the NBS's "2021 Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development."

Notably, significant income disparities exist within the daily wage worker group. The proportion of workers in Guangzhou with a monthly income above 5,000 RMB was 15.2%, significantly lower than Beijing's 26.4% and Qingdao's 33.8%. Looking at income distribution, Guangzhou had the highest proportion (33.7%) in the lowest income bracket (below 2,000 RMB). Income levels vary significantly across cities, likely related to local economic development levels, living costs, and the sectors in which daily wage work is found.

3.8 Structure of Family Income Sources

The wages of daily wage workers constitute the absolute primary economic pillar for their families. The survey shows 74.2% of daily wage workers reported their income as the main source of family support. Correspondingly, among the main channels of family income, "wage income from work" was selected by 80.5%, far exceeding other channels like "farming income" (14.2%), "business income" (3.9%), and property income, such as rent (0.4%). This positioning means any fluctuation in the daily wage worker's income directly and profoundly affects the entire family's livelihood, further explaining the vulnerability of their family economic situation.

3.9 Subjective Social Class Identification

Regarding subjective social class identification, the vast majority of daily wage workers place themselves in the lower or lower-middle class. Data shows 46.8% considered themselves belonging to the "lower class," and 30.6% to the "lower-middle class," combined nearly 80%. Only 22.6% identified as "middle class" or above. The group's general tendency towards bottom-layer self-classification correlates with their objective economic income level and family financial status.

3.10 Physical and Mental Health Status

Despite the physical and mental challenges of daily wage work, survey data indicate the group demonstrates strong psychological resilience and a positive health mindset. In health self-assessment, 58.3% considered their health status "relatively healthy" (38.4%) or "very healthy" (19.9%); 28.3% reported "average" health; and only 13.4% reported "relatively unhealthy" (11.9%) or "very unhealthy" (1.5%). This reflects a positive self-evaluation of health among most daily wage workers.

In terms of physical health, the group shows strong adaptability. Although the work involves manual labor, only 18.8% reported having underlying diseases. The proportion suffering from occupational diseases is 13.5%, indicating good physical endurance.

Regarding mental health, investigation of emotional state over the past week showed 40.7% felt "very happy" or "relatively happy"; 40.7% reported their emotional state was "average"; and only 18.6% felt "relatively bad" or "very bad." This positive emotional state is closely related to their optimistic and open-minded life attitude and strong psychological adjustment ability.

Young daily wage workers (39 and below) had the best health self-assessment, with 30.3% considering themselves "very healthy." The proportions for middle-aged (40-59) and older groups (60+) were only 15.3% and 18.9%, respectively. Male daily wage workers had more positive emotional states, with only 17.1% reporting emotional state as "relatively bad" or "very bad" in the past week, compared to 27.9% for females.

The relatively good physical and mental state displayed by daily wage workers is closely related to their positive life attitude, strong environmental adaptability, and relatively regular work rhythm. This foundation of health provides important support for coping with work challenges and reflects the resilience and vitality displayed by this group under life pressures.

3.11 Language Ability and Labor Skills

Regarding communication ability, 62.7% felt their ability to understand Mandarin was "relatively good" or "very good," while 47.7% felt their ability to speak Mandarin reached the same level, indicating slightly weaker speaking than listening skills. Regarding labor skills, 65.9% explicitly stated they had no specific labor skills, which partly explains the vulnerability of their employment and limited income.

3.12 Social Support Networks

The social relationships of daily wage workers are centered on blood and kinship ties, supplemented by support networks based on fellow townsfolk and colleagues.

In terms of residential stability, the group demonstrates considerable stability. Data shows 57.0% had lived locally for 3 years or more, 21.9% for 1-3 years, and only 21.1% for less than 1 year.

Regarding kinship support networks, daily wage workers maintain relatively close family connections. The survey shows 77.7% had contact with at least one or more relatives monthly, including 24.8% maintaining monthly contact with 3-4 relatives, 9.8% with 5-8, and 4.8% even with 9 or more relatives regularly. For emotional support, 77.9% had at least one relative they could confidently discuss private matters with, including 30.0% having 2 such relatives, and

20.8% having 3-4. For instrumental support, 77.8% had at least one relative who could provide help when needed, indicating strong family support.

Regarding friend support networks, daily wage workers are relatively socially active. 78.4% had contact with at least one or more friend monthly, including 25.6% maintaining monthly contact with 3-4 friends, 11.0% with 5-8, and 7.8% with 9 or more friends regularly. However, deeper friend support is slightly lacking: 72.3% had at least one friend they could confidently discuss private matters with, 5.6 percentage points lower than kinship support; for instrumental support, 75.5% had at least one friend who could provide help when needed.

Compared to middle-aged (40-59) and older (60+) daily wage workers, young workers (39 and below) received relatively less social support. Data shows regarding "number of relatives to turn for help," 16.2% of young workers reported "none," significantly higher than the 24.2% and 26.2% for middle-aged and older workers, respectively (Note: The original text reports higher percentages for middle-aged/older having more support, so lower % reporting "none" would be expected for them. This translation follows the data as presented, but the percentages 24.2% and 26.2% seem high for middle-aged/older reporting "none" if young are 16.2%. Possibly a data presentation issue. Translated faithfully. More critically, within their friend networks, crucial for settling in the city, the proportion of young workers selecting "none" for friends to seek help from was 16.6%, also higher than the other two groups. This comprehensive lack of support networks may be closely related to the young group's higher rate of inter-provincial migration, shorter local residence duration, and "going it alone" mobility pattern. They are detached from their hometown's traditional kinship and geographic networks yet have not established new, sufficiently stable social connections in unfamiliar cities, thus falling into a state of "double disembedding" and isolation, making their social vulnerability most prominent.

4 EMPLOYMENT QUALITY OF DAILY WAGE WORKERS

As a typical form of informal employment, the employment quality of Daily Wage work is generally low, with significant shortcomings in labor protection. This section provides an in-depth analysis of employment quality from dimensions such as reasons for choosing Daily Wage work, employment stability, working conditions, social security, and job satisfaction, revealing this group's situation within the labor market.

4.1 Reasons for Choosing Daily Wage Work

For a significant portion of laborers, daily wage work is not an active first choice but a passive option after facing obstacles in the formal employment market. On one hand, daily wage work attracts workers with its "work-and-get-paid-immediately" nature: 39.1% cited feeling they can earn money, 19.2% cited low entry barriers, and 13.2% cited time freedom, constituting the surface appeal. On the other hand, an indisputable fact is that 10.7% explicitly stated "cannot find other suitable work" as their main reason for engaging in daily wage work. For many, the mere fact of "having work" itself far outweighs demands for job quality; "having income" becomes the primary imperative for survival. Therefore, the daily wage labor market to some extent absorbs laborers excluded from the formal economic sector, but itself becomes a concentrated embodiment of employment vulnerability and social precarity.

4.2 Employment Stability and Job Search

The employment of daily wage workers exhibits extreme flexibility and instability. The survey shows a high 85.3% had no fixed occupation, and 93.4% had no fixed work unit. They primarily rely on informal channels to obtain work opportunities: "Recruitment by employers" (30.4%) and "introduction by family, relatives, friends, fellow townsfolk" (28.3%) are the main employment channels, highlighting the key role of social networks in their job search. These are followed by "recruitment by agencies" (19.4%) and "direct contact with employers by individuals" (16.5%). This highly informal job search model determines the contingency and unsustainability of their work opportunities.

Regarding sources of employment information, daily wage workers primarily rely on market channels and traditional social networks. Specifically, Direct recruitment by employers/companies is the primary source (26.5%), indicating a preference for obtaining work through direct contact. Agencies (22.1%) and various social relationships (23.0%) constitute important supplementary channels, reflecting reliance on both market services and traditional networks of reciprocal obligation (renqing networks) during job searches. In comparison, using internet platforms to find employment information also reached 17.2%, becoming a non-negligible channel, particularly among younger daily wage workers. Formal employment services like government labor departments (2%) and other organizations (3%) had the lowest usage rates, indicating clearly insufficient coverage of formal employment service systems for this group.

Regarding job search cycle and outcomes, the average interval between starting to look for work and formally starting work was 11 days, fully reflecting the "come-and-go" nature of the daily wage labor market. Data shows a high 77.9% of respondents found work within one week, with 55.8% succeeding in matching with labor demand within just 3 days. In the past week, 82.3% had "worked for some time and earned some income," with an average work duration of 4.14 days, meaning most could obtain considerable work opportunities within a week. Daily wage workers in Beijing had the highest job search efficiency, requiring an average of only 9.61 days to successfully match with a position; the cycles in Qingdao and Guangzhou were slightly longer, at 11.34 days and 12.94 days, respectively. This variation may be related to each city's economic development level, industrial structure, and the maturity of its casual labor market. Beijing, as a megacity, generates denser and more frequent daily wage labor demand through its vast service and construction sectors. However, data from all three cities showed high standard deviations, indicating significant internal variation within the

group: some workers achieved "starting the next day" or even "same-day start," but a considerable number still experienced weeks or even longer periods of unemployment. This uncertainty further highlights the volatility and vulnerability of daily wage employment.

4.3 Working Conditions and Labor Intensity

Daily wage work mostly involves low-skilled, high-intensity manual labor. Regarding job requirements, over 80% (83.9%) of jobs had no educational requirements for applicants, 75.5% had no specific skill requirements, and 89.4% had no clear requirement for professional qualification certificates. This lowers the entry barrier but also implies strong job substitutability and a lack of accumulative skills.

During the recruitment process, employer requirements regarding gender and age are salient features. Data shows 25.1% of positions explicitly required male workers, while only 3.0% explicitly required females. This indicates a clear gender preference in the daily wage labor market, with more opportunities for men. Notably, 50.9% of positions had no explicit gender requirement, and an additional 21.0% were labeled "either." However, considering the overall gender structure of the group (85.1% male), it's evident that although over 70% of positions formally set no gender threshold, significant "male dominance" exists in practice. This discrepancy may stem from the physical nature of most daily wage work and employers' implicit preferences. Further research found positions explicitly requiring males were mostly concentrated in construction sites, logistics handling, etc., while those explicitly requiring females were mainly in catering services, cleaning, etc. 52.9% of daily wage jobs had age requirements, mostly below 55 years old, a common age threshold also closely related to the high-intensity, physical nature of the work.

Daily wage work is characterized by long hours, high intensity, and low autonomy. Their average daily working time is 9.42 hours, with a maximum even reaching 20 hours. This far exceeds the 8-hour standard workday stipulated by the Labor Law, indicating overtime work is extremely common. Specifically, daily wage workers in Guangzhou faced the highest labor intensity, averaging 10.06 hours per day, with the largest standard deviation, indicating a highly uneven distribution of working hours within the group. Qingdao's average of 9.64 hours was also high. In comparison, Beijing's average daily hours (8.77) were the shortest among the three but still exceeded the standard, with a smaller standard deviation indicating more concentrated and stable working hours for Beijing's daily wage workers.

Regarding work autonomy, daily wage workers have quite limited control over their work methods. Although 21.4% reported being able to "decide work methods completely autonomously," and 22.9% could do so "to a relatively large extent," over half (55.6%) had medium to low autonomy. Specifically, 20.8% considered their autonomy average, 16.7% reported small autonomy, and another 18.1% reported "completely no autonomy," needing to strictly follow employer instructions. The group with education at the elementary school level or below showed the strongest dependence on employer instructions, with 20.8% reporting "completely no autonomy." The high school and above group had the lowest proportions in both "completely no autonomy" (14.9%) and "autonomy to a relatively small extent" (15.3%), indicating their overall work situation might be slightly better than the other groups.

4.4 Social Security Coverage

Social security coverage for daily wage workers is extremely weak. The participation rates for various social insurance schemes are severely low, creating a stark contrast with their employment risks and economic vulnerability. For pension insurance, the participation rate is only 32.6%, meaning over two-thirds (67.4%) will face a lack of retirement protection upon reaching retirement age. Unemployment insurance coverage is the most severe, with a participation rate as low as 7.6% - 92.4% will receive no income compensation if unemployed. Work-related injury insurance participation is equally concerning, at only 8.8%, forming a sharp contrast with the high-risk nature of their work; 91.2% lack basic protection in case of work injury. Housing provident fund coverage is the most limited, with an ownership rate of only 5.7%, and 94.3% are completely excluded from the housing security system. Relatively speaking, medical insurance participation is higher at 68.8%, but the primary form relies on the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme based on their place of hukou registration, which has quite limited coverage levels and reimbursement scope.

According to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security's "2022 Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Human Resources and Social Security Initiatives"[8], by the end of 2022, the number of people participating in unemployment insurance and work injury insurance nationwide reached 238 million and 291 million, respectively. The national participation rates for employed persons were approximately 32.4% for unemployment insurance and 39.6% for work injury insurance. The participation rates of the daily wage worker group are significantly lower than these national averages. This comprehensive lack of protection makes daily wage workers extremely vulnerable when facing risks like injury, illness, unemployment, or old age, with almost no socialized risk-sharing mechanism to rely on, forcing dependence on personal meager savings or traditional family network support. This further exacerbates their economic vulnerability and social marginalization.

Married daily wage workers (currently living with spouse) generally had the highest participation rates across all social insurance types, reflecting the potential motivation for enrollment brought by family responsibilities. Specifically, their pension insurance participation rate was 38.3%, and medical insurance participation reached a high 76.7%, significantly higher than other groups. In contrast, unmarried daily wage workers had the most fragile coverage, with the lowest participation rates across all schemes: pension (16.1%) and medical (46.2%) insurance participation rates were both below half, while unemployment insurance (7.2%) and housing fund (5.6%) participation were even more severe,

highlighting this group's double disadvantage due to lack of family responsibilities and disconnect from the social security system. Divorced/widowed groups showed an intermediate state: their participation rates, while lower than the married group, were generally higher than the unmarried group; their medical insurance participation rate was 66.3%. This suggests that although the dissolution of marriage brings shock, past life experiences or family burdens (e.g., raising children) may still maintain their willingness to enroll to some extent.

Daily wage workers in Qingdao led other cities in participation rates for multiple key insurances. For pension, unemployment, work injury insurance, and housing fund, Qingdao's participation rates ranked first: pension insurance 39.1%, unemployment insurance 10.9%, work injury insurance 14.9%, housing fund 9.2%. Particularly for unemployment and work injury insurance, Qingdao's rates were significantly higher than Beijing and Guangzhou, showing advantages in occupational risk protection for workers. Although Qingdao's medical insurance participation rate was slightly lower than Beijing's, it was still significantly higher than Guangzhou's. Overall, Qingdao provides a more comprehensive and solid social security network for workers, with an overall welfare security level leading among the three cities.

4.5 Job Satisfaction and Future Expectations

Job satisfaction among daily wage workers is generally low, with significant variations across dimensions. The proportion expressing "very satisfied" or "relatively satisfied" with various aspects of work did not exceed 40%. Satisfaction with work hours was relatively highest, combined 38.6% (very satisfied 6.4%, relatively satisfied 26.6%). Satisfaction with work intensity was 32.1% (very satisfied 3.4%, relatively satisfied 23.6%). However, dissatisfaction was particularly prominent on core dimensions concerning vital interests: the proportion "somewhat dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with wage income was as high as 41.3%; dissatisfaction with work condition guarantees reached 49.7%; and dissatisfaction with future development prospects was even higher at 53.0%, showing the group's widespread pessimism regarding upward mobility channels.

This dissatisfaction aligns with their worries about the future. A high 56.0% believed the possibility of unemployment in the next 6 months was "very high" or "relatively high," while 61.6% were pessimistic about income growth in the coming year, believing the possibility was "relatively small" or "very small." This dual concern about employment stability and income prospects deeply reflects the vulnerable position of daily wage workers in the labor market.

Despite this, daily wage workers hold clear expectations and desires for improvement. Regarding the improvements they most hope to obtain, "hope for higher wages" ranked first with a mention rate of 31.0%. "Hope for more work opportunities" (19.3%) and "hope for more stable work" (16.2%) ranked second and third, respectively. These three demands clearly reflect the group's urgent desire for higher income levels and employment stability. Relatively, developmental demands like "hope for more welfare guarantees" and "hope for learning/training opportunities" had lower mention rates (7.4% and 3.5% respectively), reflecting that when basic survival needs are not fully met, daily wage workers focus more on immediate economic returns than long-term development. Notably, 4.8% expressed "no particular expectations," behind which may lie a sense of powerlessness and passive adaptation after long-term hardship.

5 MOBILITY PATTERNS AND FUTURE PLANS: WHERE FROM, WHERE TO?

The mobility patterns of daily wage workers show distinct regional characteristics and complex dynamics, while their plans reflect hesitation and choice between urban and rural areas. Based on survey data, this section analyzes dimensions including mobility motivation, mobility characteristics, living conditions, and future intentions, revealing the spatial trajectories and life strategies of this group.

5.1 Mobility Motivation

The mobility of daily wage workers has a clear economic orientation. The survey shows the primary reason for first coming to the locality was highly concentrated: "work/employment" accounted for 90.5%. Other reasons like business (1.5%) or moving with family (3.2%), had low proportions, indicating economic factors are the primary motivation for cross-regional mobility. This singular mobility motive was further reinforced in the current move, with the proportion for work/employment rising to 92.2%, fully reflecting the strong economic demands and survival rationality of the group.

5.2 Mobility Characteristics

Regarding mode of mobility, during their first move, 52.8% came alone, 26.7% came with family/relatives, and 19.7% came with fellow townsfolk/classmates/friends. Notably, the proportion coming alone in the current move increased to 58.7%, while the proportion coming with family/relatives decreased to 24.4%, reflecting increased independence during repeated mobility.

In terms of mobility scope, inter-provincial migration dominates (69.8%), followed by intra-provincial cross-city migration (21.1%), and intra-city cross-district migration (9.1%). Beijing's daily wage workers had the highest inter-provincial migration rate (92.7%), followed by Guangzhou (71.5%), with Qingdao relatively lower (45.3%). This pattern closely aligns with the places of origin: Beijing's workers are mainly from Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Shanxi;

nearly half of Guangzhou's from Hubei, then Hunan, Guangdong itself; Qingdao's mainly from Shandong itself and Northeast China (Heilongjiang).

Daily wage workers with education at junior high level or below were more inclined towards inter-provincial migration (>70%), often choosing short-term work driven by economics, with a strong intention to return home within 1 year. Although middle-aged workers had the highest inter-provincial rate (75.3%), they showed a stronger intention to settle in the city (40.1% planned local settlement), reflecting their pursuit of a stable life as family economic pillars. Furthermore, those with high school education and above were more inclined towards nearby mobility, and their long-term residence intention was significantly higher than the low-education group, highlighting the key role of education level in enhancing urban adaptability and employment stability.

5.3 Living Conditions

Daily wage workers exhibit characteristics of "renting predominantly, poor stability." 70.9% of respondents had fixed accommodation locally, but housing conditions are generally simple: 76.6% rented private housing, 8.9% rented employer/unit housing, 5.4% rented hotel rooms, while the proportion owning their home was only 2.9%. This living pattern reflects both their temporary nature as migrant workers and the economic constraints they face in settling down in the city.

Regarding residential stability, 57.0% had lived locally for 3 years or more, 21.9% for 1-3 years, and only 21.1% for less than 1 year, indicating most have achieved a certain degree of stable residence.

5.4 Future Plans

Regarding plans, the daily wage worker group shows clear differentiation and uncertainty. Only 36.9% intended to reside locally long-term (5+ years), 37.5% explicitly did not intend long-term residence, and 25.6% were in a state of hesitation ("haven't thought it through"). Regarding intention to return home, 29.2% planned to return within 1 year, 7.5% within 1-2 years, while 18.7% did not plan to return, and another 36.1% had no clear plan yet. This ambiguity and diversity in planning reflect both the bewilderment about future development and the differentiated choices under different life cycle stages and family responsibilities.

The mobility patterns of daily wage workers present typical characteristics of "economically driven, socially network-assisted, predominantly inter-provincial." Their plans involve difficult choices between "staying in the city" and "returning home."

6 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Through systematic investigation of daily wage workers in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Qingdao, this study depicts a group portrait far more complex and diverse than the "Sanhe Great Gods" stereotype. Data indicate that China's daily wage workers are not a subcultural group composed solely of young males pursuing "lying flat," but a vast contingent predominantly comprising middle-aged, married, male migrants with agricultural hukou, yet also including significant proportions of women and workers across different age segments. They leave their hometowns, primarily originating from traditional labor-exporting provinces, navigate the urban margins, engage in high-intensity, low-security temporary work like construction, logistics, and cleaning, supporting both the daily operation of the urban economy and their family livelihoods with their unstable labor. Their educational level is generally low, and they lack labor skills, which both drives their entry into the daily wage labor market and constitutes an invisible ceiling for their career development.

The livelihood model of daily wage workers exhibits high vulnerability and instability. Their employment highly depends on informal social networks and labor markets; work opportunities are intermittent; income fluctuates sharply, leading over half of families to merely balance income and expenditure or even require borrowing. More severely, they are almost completely excluded from the formal social security system, with extremely low participation rates in social insurance, making them exceptionally vulnerable when facing risks like illness, injury, unemployment, and old age. This state of "no accumulation, no security, no advancement" locks them into a survival mode of "high risk, low resilience," where any unexpected shock can plunge their families into difficulty.

The phenomenon of daily wage labor is not an accidental choice by individual workers; it reflects a "last-resort" employment option for laborers excluded from the formal labor market due to factors like age, skills, and education amidst economic restructuring and employment diversification. Its existence stems from the combined effect of multiple institutional factors, including the urban-rural dual structure, insufficient coverage of the social security system for flexible workers, and a lack of vocational skills training. Therefore, improving the living conditions of daily wage workers cannot remain at the level of moral concern but requires systematic institutional reflection and construction. This necessitates exploring the establishment of a social security system matching the characteristics of flexible employment, expanding the coverage of work injury insurance and occupational injury protection, and innovating enrollment methods for pension and medical insurance. Simultaneously, strengthening public employment services, providing more skills training opportunities and information channels for casual workers, and empowering them to achieve more stable, higher-quality employment might be the fundamental path to breaking the cycle of their livelihood vulnerability.

This study, through a large-scale quantitative survey, reveals the multi-dimensional reality of the daily wage worker group for the first time, providing a solid data foundation for understanding this group hidden in urban corners. However, the forms of daily wage labor and its ecological environment are still evolving rapidly. Future research could further focus on the impact of new control methods like platform algorithm management on daily wage workers, as well as group differences under different city types and policy environments, thereby providing continuous intellectual contribution and policy insights for promoting a fairer, more inclusive urbanization process.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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