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IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Report (2022)

With the generous support of the IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, I was able to travel to China this summer to conduct pre-dissertation research. In this report, I will briefly introduce my research topic, summer fieldwork, and the next steps.

To start with, my research focuses on the social and psychological consequences of rising precarious work in China since the 1970s. Coinciding with the turn to neoliberalism in the USA in the 1970s, China also experienced a historic transformation from a planned economy toward a market economy in the late 1970s, after which the amount of precarious work dramatically increased. To date, the social and psychological consequences of rising precarity, however, have not been well understood, and my research aims to contribute to this line of literature by investigating and theorizing how precarious work experiences shape individuals' sense of self-worth, social relationships, and attitudes toward social inequality in China. Before the fieldwork, I had collected some governmental documents to learn the political and economic contexts of employment relationships in China; I had also compared attitudes toward work and social inequality between China and the US based on second-hand survey data.

My summer fieldwork consists of two major parts: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Before entering the field, I had conducted online interviews with three Chinese precarious workers (one factory worker, one truck driver, and one sales clerk) to have a sense of what should be dived deep into in the field. After entering the field in July,

I was able to recruit respondents in their workplaces, such as factories, restaurants, barber shops, and construction sites. In-person interviews not only allowed me to have better interactions with my interviewees, but I also had opportunities to observe their work environment and working process. I conducted some interviews at the interviewees' homes with their permission to have some observations on their living environment as well. Apart from low-paid precarious workers, I interviewed several businessmen and employees with stable jobs and higher levels of social benefits (e.g., civil servants and doctors) to have some comparisons between people with different levels of stability, security, and economic capacity. Most of my interviewees were aged between 30 and 65. I focused on this age group because they had more working experiences to share, and they were less willing to change jobs frequently than their younger counterparts.

Based on the collected data, I reached some interesting preliminary findings. First, precarity indeed contributed to less self-confidence among precarious workers, as they tended to think that they had achieved nothing in their careers. On the other hand, they did not lose their purpose in life, and most precarious workers claimed that they were struggling to support their families, especially for their children, possibly under the influence of the family culture in China. Despite being faced with unstable and unpredictable careers, precarious workers still saw their qualities as being hard-working and having a strong sense of family obligation, which shows their agency in constructing their self-worth. Second, while most previous research on attitudes toward social inequality focused on the economic aspect (i.e., income and wealth), my research suggests that attitudes toward social inequality could also

be related to job quality. Precarious workers tended to compare them with formal employees working in party and governmental organizations, public institutions, and state-run enterprises, who worried less about losing their jobs and enjoyed a higher level of social benefits. What surprised me is that low-income precarious workers empathized with businessmen and employers who also bore the pressure of economic loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, although these employers might cut down workers' salaries to reduce running costs. It seemed that precarity as a sharing experience could integrate social groups with conflicting economic interests.

These preliminary findings have strengthened my confidence in this research project, and I will continue to work on it for more fruitful results. Currently, I am still transcribing interview recordings before conducting deeper data analysis. I plan to finish transcription by the end of January 2023 and start to draft a paper based on my summer fieldwork in 2023 Spring. Since I found an interesting site (a job market where many gig workers waiting for jobs) in my field, I plan to conduct more ethnographic work there when I get more funding. I would also employ quantitative analysis to examine the generalizability of my qualitative findings.

Again, I am sincerely grateful for this valuable funding opportunity from IRIS, without which my summer fieldwork would not be possible.