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Social Insurance Coverage for Emerging Occupational Groups in China: Problems, Causes, and Policy Responses

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Abstract. The rapid expansion of platform-mediated and flexible employment has created a growing mismatch between new forms of work and social insurance institutions that were designed primarily around stable employment relationships and employer-based contributions. Focusing on China, this review examines social insurance coverage among emerging occupational groups, especially workers who obtain jobs through digital platforms, online matching systems, or project-based arrangements. The paper argues that insufficient protection is multidimensional: it includes incomplete insurance portfolios, contribution interruptions, weak portability, mismatches between occupational risks and available protection, and gaps between formal enrollment and effective benefit access. These problems are not adequately explained by low individual willingness to participate. Rather, they arise from the interaction of employment-status ambiguity, asymmetric platform control and responsibility, volatile earnings, territorial administration, information barriers, and uneven service accessibility. China's occupational injury protection pilot represents an important institutional innovation because it weakens the traditional dependence of work-injury protection on a standard labor relationship. Nevertheless, occupational injury protection cannot substitute for a coherent social insurance package. The paper therefore proposes differentiated responsibility based on actual platform control and economic dependence, more flexible contribution arrangements, multi-platform contribution aggregation, improved national portability, stronger risk-prevention obligations, and targeted affordability support. These reforms would shift policy from nominal coverage expansion toward continuous and effective protection.

Keywords: new forms of employment, social insurance, platform workers, occupational injury protection, China

1. Introduction

1.1. Practical background

Digitalization is changing not only how goods and services are traded but also how labor is organized. App-based delivery couriers, ride-hailing drivers, truck drivers, online marketers, livestreamers, and professionals who obtain assignments through digital platforms increasingly work outside the conventional model of a long-term contract with a single employer. In China, the scale of

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this transformation is already substantial. The Ninth National Survey on the Status of the Workforce reported approximately 84 million workers in new forms of employment, within a national workforce of about 402 million [1]. A later State Council report stated that the broader flexible-employment population had exceeded 200 million. By the end of 2024, 70.57 million flexible workers were participating in employee basic pension insurance and 66.159 million in employee basic medical insurance [2]. These figures indicate that non-standard employment is no longer a peripheral segment of the labor market. They also show why employment expansion and adequate social insurance coverage should not be treated as equivalent outcomes.

This paper uses the term emerging occupational groups to refer mainly to workers who obtain labor opportunities through digital platforms, online organizational systems, or project-based transactions and whose employment relationships, working time, earnings, or contribution responsibilities are less stable than those of standard employees. The category therefore includes location-based platform workers, such as delivery couriers and ride-hailing drivers, as well as selected online service providers and other flexible workers whose social insurance status is affected by non-standard employment arrangements. It does not simply include every occupation newly added to an official occupational catalogue. The analytical focus is narrower: workers for whom the institutional link between employment and social insurance has become uncertain, discontinuous, or fragmented.

China has progressively responded to these changes. In 2021, eight central authorities issued the Guiding Opinions on Protecting the Labor Security Rights and Interests of Workers in New Forms of Employment. The document required localities to relax household-registration restrictions on flexible workers participating in basic pension and medical insurance at the place of employment, clarified responsibilities for several types of platform work, and called for a pilot occupational injury protection scheme [3]. The occupational injury pilot began on July 1, 2022. A 2025 policy expanded the pilot by province, platform, and industry and revised the underlying rules [4]. From July 1, 2026, the pilot was extended to all 31 provincial-level regions and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. By the end of June 2026, cumulative participation had reached 29.902 million workers [5]. The policy trajectory shows clear institutional movement, but it also highlights a central question: how can social insurance systems designed around stable employment adapt to work that is fluid, multi-platform, and algorithmically managed?

1.2. Theoretical background and significance

Platform work complicates the conventional boundary between autonomy and subordination. Workers may choose when to log on or whether to accept a particular task, yet platforms can still influence earnings and behavior through pricing, order allocation, ratings, incentive systems, penalties, and account access. Wood et al. show that platform-mediated work can combine flexibility with intensive algorithmic control [6]. Vallas and Schor similarly argue that platforms often decentralize transactional responsibility while retaining concentrated governance power [7]. Evidence from China reinforces this interpretation. Sun documents how food-delivery algorithms reorganize everyday labor and discipline workers through data-driven routines [8], while Chen and Sun show how the demand for immediacy restructures workers' time and produces a fragmented, high-pressure labor rhythm [9]. Lei further demonstrates that technological, organizational, and legal arrangements jointly form a broader platform architecture of control [10].

This change in labor control has direct implications for social insurance. Standard employee insurance assumes a relatively identifiable employer, continuous wage payment, and an organizational actor responsible for registration and part of the contribution. Platform workers, by

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contrast, may interact simultaneously with a platform headquarters, local contractors, franchisees, labor-service firms, or multiple digital platforms. Lin notes that access to labor-law protection for on-demand workers in China has been strongly conditioned by whether a formal labor relationship can be established [11]. Zhang and Liu, examining platform-based food delivery, find that a voluntary and self-sponsored approach to social security is markedly less effective than employer-supported participation in extending protection to gig workers [12]. The social insurance problem should therefore be understood not merely as a matter of individual preference but as a question of institutional fit and risk allocation.

The practical significance of this review is to move beyond a binary indicator of whether a worker is insured. Effective social insurance requires at least four dimensions: entry into the system, completeness of the insurance package, continuity of contributions, and actual access to benefits when a covered risk occurs. The analytical significance is equally important. By connecting labor organization with social insurance, the paper explains why ambiguous employment status, economic dependence, income volatility, territorial administration, and platform governance can jointly shape protection. This perspective helps clarify why nominal expansion of enrollment may coexist with substantial insecurity.

2. Social insurance problems among emerging occupational groups

2.1. Coverage gaps are multidimensional

The first problem is that insufficient coverage is structural rather than simply a matter of being insured or uninsured. Some workers remain outside employee social insurance and rely mainly on resident pension or medical schemes. Others participate in employee pension and medical insurance but lack protection against unemployment, work-related injury, maternity-related income loss, or other employment-linked risks. Because resident and employee schemes differ in financing arrangements, contribution levels, and benefit structures, participation in any one public program should not automatically be interpreted as adequate occupational protection. Mao and Li find that workers in new forms of employment who have more stable work and characteristics closer to regular employment are more likely to choose employee medical insurance [13]. Ran and Qiu likewise show that platform workers can become caught between employee and resident medical insurance because their employment identity is ambiguous while the two systems remain institutionally segmented [14].

A review of social insurance coverage must therefore distinguish breadth from adequacy. The relevant questions are not only whether a worker has insurance, but which scheme the worker joins, which risks are covered, who pays, whether contributions are continuous, and whether the resulting benefits are meaningful relative to occupational and life-cycle risks. A high nominal participation rate may mask thin coverage if a large share of workers are concentrated in low-benefit arrangements or are missing insurance against the risks most directly generated by their work.

2.2. Labor mobility conflicts with contribution continuity

Emerging occupational groups often move rapidly across platforms, cities, and employment statuses. A delivery courier may work full time for one platform for several months, switch to another platform, combine delivery with other work, or leave the sector temporarily. Similar patterns occur among ride-hailing drivers and online freelancers. Social insurance, however, has historically relied on monthly contributions, territorial administration, and relatively stable contribution bases. The

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result is a mismatch between mobile work and continuous insurance records. When orders fall or family expenses rise, long-term insurance contributions may become one of the first expenditures postponed by self-financing workers. When workers change cities, they may also face information, transfer, and administrative costs. Ran and Qiu identify discontinuous participation as an important dimension of the medical-insurance dilemma faced by platform workers [14].

Contribution interruption matters because social insurance is cumulative and intertemporal. A worker who is technically insured at one point in time may still face weaker long-term pension entitlements, interruptions in medical treatment eligibility, or gaps in employment-related protection if contribution records repeatedly break. For highly mobile workers, the relevant policy standard should therefore be continuity across jobs and locations rather than coverage at a single observation date.

2.3. Occupational risk and social protection remain misaligned

Location-based platform work is often exposed to traffic accidents, extreme weather, fatigue, and pressure to complete tasks within short time windows. Algorithmic management can intensify these risks by linking income and ratings to speed, acceptance rates, and continuous availability. Studies of food-delivery work in China show that platform time discipline can force workers to trade off safety against income and customer expectations [8, 9]. This creates a particularly visible contradiction: workers may face high occupational risk while lacking access to conventional work-injury insurance because the employment relationship needed to allocate employer responsibility is disputed or absent.

The occupational injury protection pilot addresses this gap through a design adapted to platform work. Under the revised rules, covered platforms are responsible for enrolling eligible workers, contributions are linked to platform orders, and participation is not premised on proving a standard labor relationship [4]. The 2026 nationwide expansion therefore represents a major institutional innovation [5]. Yet occupational injury protection is necessarily partial. It addresses defined work-related injuries and related benefits; it does not replace pension protection, medical coverage for ordinary illness, unemployment protection, or broader income security. Treating the pilot as a complete solution would therefore understate the multidimensional nature of social insurance needs.

2.4. Formal enrollment does not guarantee effective access

Effective coverage extends beyond registration. Workers must understand contribution rules, transfer their records, submit claims, identify the responsible platform or institution, and receive benefits in practice. This last-mile problem is especially relevant for workers whose working hours are irregular and whose place of work, residence, and household registration may differ. A formally insured worker may still face uncertainty about benefit eligibility after moving to another city, or may not know whether a platform-provided commercial accident policy is equivalent to statutory occupational injury protection. Administrative complexity can therefore convert nominal coverage into weak practical protection.

Internal heterogeneity further complicates average coverage indicators. A full-time courier who depends on one platform for basic living expenses has a different risk profile from a part-time ride-hailing driver who already receives social insurance from another employer. A high-skilled online freelancer may face low traffic risk but substantial income volatility and long-term pension concerns. Schor et al. find that dependence on platform income is a major predictor of precarity in platform work [15]. Policy assessment should therefore distinguish workers by occupational risk,

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income dependence, employment purpose, and existing insurance rather than treating emerging occupational groups as a homogeneous category.

3. Causes of social insurance coverage problems

3.1. Employer-based social insurance does not fully fit non-standard work

A central cause is the institutional legacy of employer-based social insurance. In the standard employment model, the employer is identifiable, wages are paid continuously, and the organization completes registration and shares contribution obligations with the worker. Platform work can dissolve or obscure each of these conditions. Workers are paid per order or project, may serve several platforms, and may be managed through contractors or franchise networks. Where entry into an insurance program or the allocation of contribution responsibility depends on establishing a labor relationship, ambiguity over employment status becomes ambiguity over social insurance responsibility. Lou argues that workers in new business forms require insurance arrangements that respond to high mobility and non-standard relationships rather than mechanically reproducing the standard employee model [16].

The 2021 Guiding Opinions already recognized a spectrum of relationships: standard labor relationships, situations that do not fully meet the criteria for a labor relationship but involve labor management, and genuinely independent business or freelance activity [3]. This policy recognition is important because a binary legal classification can be too coarse for platform work. Wang proposes a tripartite governance approach that provides a rights floor for workers who fall between standard employment and fully independent contracting [17]. From a social insurance perspective, the key issue is not classification for its own sake, but whether the classification creates a clear and enforceable path to contribution responsibility and benefit access.

3.2. Platform control and social insurance responsibility are asymmetric

A second cause is the asymmetry between control and responsibility. Platforms can influence work through data without relying on conventional supervision. A worker may have no fixed workplace or formal shift but still face strong incentives and penalties generated by rankings, dispatch priorities, customer ratings, and account sanctions. The platform therefore retains substantial capacity to organize labor and distribute economic opportunities [6-10]. However, social insurance responsibility can be fragmented through outsourcing, franchise arrangements, crowdsourcing, or civil contracts. The result is a governance pattern in which control is concentrated while risk-bearing is dispersed.

Xie argues that the special characteristics of platform employment make it difficult for existing labor-law rules to protect all platform workers effectively and calls for a dedicated framework of basic labor rights, including occupational safety and algorithm-related rights [18]. This diagnosis is directly relevant to social insurance. If platforms can increase task intensity or shape exposure to risk without internalizing a corresponding share of social protection costs, they have weak incentives to reduce the risks their management systems create. Coverage deficits are therefore partly a problem of incomplete risk pricing and responsibility allocation, not simply insufficient worker awareness.

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3.3. Self-financed participation meets volatile and uncertain income

When workers cannot participate through an employer, they often enter pension or medical insurance as flexible workers and bear a much larger share of the contribution directly. This arrangement can preserve access, but it also converts an organizational responsibility problem into a household cash-flow problem. Platform earnings may vary with demand, season, local competition, platform pricing, and the worker's ability to remain online. Fixed contribution schedules can therefore be difficult to reconcile with unstable income. The burden is particularly acute for low-income workers, workers supporting dependents, and people who regard platform work as temporary.

Zhang and Liu show that voluntary, self-sponsored social security has important limitations in the Chinese food-delivery sector [12]. The problem should not be reduced to short-sightedness. Workers may rationally prioritize current consumption when income is volatile, especially if they are uncertain about how long they will remain in the occupation or where they will live in the future. A scheme that formally allows participation but places most financial responsibility on the worker can therefore generate low take-up, low contribution bases, or repeated interruption even when workers value social protection.

3.4. Territorial administration, information costs, and long-term uncertainty compound each other

Emerging occupational groups frequently work across the boundaries of household registration, residence, platform registration, and service location. Differences in local contribution bases, subsidies, administrative procedures, and service capacity can increase the transaction cost of maintaining insurance. China has progressively improved participation at the place of employment and social insurance transfer mechanisms [3], but mobile workers still need to understand multiple local rules and preserve continuity when their work location changes. These frictions are more burdensome for workers with irregular schedules and limited time for administrative procedures.

Information asymmetry compounds the problem. Social insurance benefits are long term and partly contingent, whereas contributions are immediate and visible. Workers may have difficulty comparing employee and resident insurance, understanding portability, or distinguishing statutory social insurance from commercial policies purchased by platforms. If expected future benefits are uncertain, the perceived value of current contributions falls. In this sense, low participation can reflect a combination of institutional complexity, incomplete information, and rational responses to uncertainty. Improving coverage therefore requires lowering both financial and administrative transaction costs.

4. Strategies to promote social insurance coverage

4.1. Match responsibility to actual control and economic dependence

The first priority is to develop a differentiated responsibility mechanism. Emerging occupational groups should not be treated as a single category of flexible workers who are expected to finance their own protection. Responsibility should reflect substantive features of the working relationship, including platform pricing power, order allocation, performance assessment, account control, labor quotas, access to customers, and the worker's dependence on platform income. Where a platform exercises strong control and provides the worker's principal source of income, its contribution

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responsibility should move closer to that of an employer. Where a genuinely independent professional controls prices, clients, and work organization, personal contributions combined with public support may be more appropriate. This approach is consistent with the move away from a rigid employment-versus-civil-contract dichotomy in recent Chinese policy and scholarship [3, 17, 18].

The same principle should apply across subcontracting chains. Platforms should not be able to externalize social insurance obligations merely by inserting a contractor, franchisee, or labor-service firm between themselves and workers. Rules should specify the respective duties of headquarters, local operators, and actual managers, and provide a mechanism for tracing responsibility when the contractual chain is complex. The objective is not to classify every platform worker as an employee, but to prevent organizational form from becoming a tool for separating control from social risk.

4.2. Decouple basic eligibility from standard employment without decoupling responsibility

Basic social protection should be accessible even when the worker's legal status is disputed or falls outside a standard labor relationship. The 2021 Guiding Opinions moved in this direction by expanding place-of-employment access to pension and medical insurance and by creating an occupational injury pilot for platform workers [3]. The next step is to make the access principle more coherent across risks. Workers should not need to resolve a complex employment-status dispute before obtaining basic protection against illness, old age, or occupational injury.

However, decoupling eligibility from standard employment must not mean decoupling platform responsibility from the labor process. If institutional reform simply allows workers to buy insurance individually, platforms may retain control while public finance and workers absorb the cost. A sustainable arrangement must distinguish two questions: whether the worker can enter the system and who should finance that entry. Eligibility can be broad and employment-status neutral, while contribution responsibility can still be allocated according to control, economic dependence, income generation, and risk creation.

4.3. Build contribution rules around orders and income volatility

The occupational injury scheme demonstrates that contribution design can be adapted to platform transactions. The revised rules require covered platform enterprises to enroll eligible workers, report order information, and pay occupational injury contributions calculated with reference to order volume and industry-specific standards [4]. This logic can inform broader reform even if it cannot be copied mechanically to every insurance branch. For order-based workers, platform contributions could be linked to the labor income or transaction volume generated on each platform and aggregated into the worker's social insurance account. For workers with variable earnings, contribution periods and payment schedules could be made more flexible while maintaining minimum protection standards.

Flexibility should address timing rather than erode adequacy. Allowing monthly, quarterly, or income-proportional payments can reduce the mismatch between fixed contributions and fluctuating cash flow. Temporary interruption rules should also facilitate resumption without excessive administrative penalties. The aim is to convert episodic work into continuous social insurance rights. For pensions in particular, continuity and cumulative rights are more important than requiring every worker to make the same fixed payment at the same frequency.

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4.4. Aggregate contributions across platforms and improve national portability

Multi-platform work should not produce either duplicate contributions or a vacuum of responsibility. A worker may generate labor income simultaneously from several platforms, and each platform should bear a share of the social protection cost associated with the income and risks it creates. A unified identity-based account can aggregate contribution records across platforms. The occupational injury rules already require platforms to report worker and order information through a nationally coordinated information system, including situations in which workers take orders on multiple platforms [4]. This infrastructure provides a practical reference for broader data coordination.

Portability should also follow the worker rather than a single employer or locality. Registration, contribution records, benefit inquiries, and transfer procedures should be standardized as far as possible across regions. Workers changing cities should not repeatedly open accounts, provide the same evidence, or experience long waiting periods before entitlements become usable. The 2021 policy explicitly called for more convenient social insurance administration and better transfer services for new forms of employment [3]. Continued progress in national data interoperability is therefore central to turning formal mobility rights into practical continuity.

4.5. Extend occupational injury protection from compensation to prevention and algorithm governance

The nationwide occupational injury expansion is a major step because it directly recognizes the risk profile of mobile and multi-platform work [5]. The next stage should strengthen prevention. Platform algorithms influence delivery time, route selection, order stacking, continuous online incentives, and the consequences of refusing tasks. If contribution rules respond only after accidents occur, platforms may not face a sufficiently strong incentive to redesign risky management practices. The revised occupational injury rules already provide for differentiated contribution standards linked to occupational injury experience and require platform enterprises to undertake prevention responsibilities, including optimizing algorithms and setting reasonable labor quotas [4].

These provisions should be implemented as an integrated risk-governance mechanism. Accident rates, serious injury rates, safety training, extreme-weather dispatch policies, and compliance with rest requirements can inform platform-level risk assessments. Where persistent risk is high, contribution rates and regulatory scrutiny can increase; where platforms demonstrably reduce injury risks, the system can provide corresponding incentives. Social insurance would then perform not only a compensatory function but also a preventive one, internalizing part of the social cost of algorithmic labor management.

4.6. Target affordability support and reduce administrative transaction costs

Public support should focus on workers for whom contribution affordability is a genuine barrier. A universal reduction in contribution obligations may weaken financing and subsidize high-income independent professionals unnecessarily. More targeted assistance can be based on actual income, household burden, employment transitions, or periods of unusually high income volatility. Temporary subsidies or lower entry thresholds can help workers preserve insurance during transitions. Such subsidies, however, should be clearly separated from contributions that platforms are required to pay; public finance should not become a substitute for private responsibility.

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Administrative accessibility matters just as much as contribution rates. Enrollment calculators, benefit comparisons, transfer services, and occupational injury claims should be embedded in the digital channels workers actually use, including platform applications and integrated government service systems. Information should answer concrete questions: how much is paid, who pays it, what benefit is received, how rights move across regions, and what happens when a worker uses several platforms. The policy goal should shift from generic publicity toward reducing the real transaction costs of participation. The 2025 and 2026 occupational injury arrangements, which rely on platform data reporting and a nationally coordinated information infrastructure, show that digital administration can be designed around the characteristics of platform work rather than forcing workers to adapt to procedures created for standard employment [4,5].

4.7. Strengthen platform data reporting and cross-department coordination

Finally, effective social insurance requires reliable information on the labor process. Platform enterprises should report active workers, order volumes, labor income, contribution records, and occupational injury data in a standardized and auditable form. Human resources and social security authorities, tax authorities, transport regulators, market regulators, health-insurance agencies, and trade unions each hold only part of the information needed to identify coverage gaps. Cross-department data coordination can reduce under-reporting, identify abnormal contribution patterns, and improve the enforcement of platform responsibilities. The 2021 Guiding Opinions called for a platform employment reporting system, while the occupational injury framework has already institutionalized extensive order and enrollment data reporting [3, 4].

Data governance should remain functionally tied to protection. The purpose is not to collect information for its own sake, but to ensure that contribution obligations correspond to actual labor activity and that workers can prove eligibility when a dispute arises. Better data can also support differentiated risk rates, multi-platform contribution aggregation, and more accurate policy evaluation. In a labor market increasingly organized through digital records, social insurance administration must be able to follow the same digital traces that platforms already use to organize work.

5. Conclusion

The social insurance difficulties of emerging occupational groups in China are best understood as an institutional adaptation problem. New forms of employment have weakened the traditional alignment between a stable employer, continuous wage payment, and employer-based social insurance responsibility. As a result, coverage deficits appear not only as non-participation but also as incomplete insurance portfolios, interrupted contributions, weak portability, occupational risk mismatches, and barriers to effective benefit access. Existing literature shows that platform control can coexist with formal worker autonomy, while voluntary self-financing alone is unlikely to reproduce the protection achieved under employer-supported systems [6, 7, 12].

China's policy evolution, especially the nationwide expansion of occupational injury protection in 2026, demonstrates that social insurance can be redesigned around high mobility, order-based work, and multi-platform employment [4, 5]. The broader reform challenge is to extend this adaptive logic beyond one risk category. A more coherent system should allocate responsibility according to actual control and economic dependence, provide flexible but adequate contribution mechanisms, aggregate rights across platforms, improve national portability, strengthen risk prevention, and target affordability support where it is most needed. The objective is not to create a wholly separate

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welfare system for platform workers, but to make the existing social insurance architecture sufficiently inclusive, continuous, and effective for a labor market in which standard employment is no longer the only organizing form.

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