

## “Pulling the sheep’s wool”: The labour of online thrift in a Chinese factory

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**Uncorrected  
Postprint**

McDonald, T & Li D. (Forthcoming). “Pulling the sheep’s wool”: The labour of online thrift in a Chinese factory. *Journal of Consumer Culture*.

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in a factory in south-east China to describe the significance of a group of activities colloquially known as “pulling the sheep’s wool” (*haoyangmao*). This wide-ranging set of thrift-oriented practices involves gaining rewards and discounts by collecting various credits and points, most often through activities conducted on online shopping, news and payment platforms. Recent studies have sought to reposition thrift as a morally-infused consumptive practice for the creation of value, through which the concept of the house is enacted. However, this paper demonstrates how thrift is viewed by labourers as a kind of “work”. As such, it is able to act in a factory environment largely unmoored from notions of domesticity, instead delineating social boundaries between production line workers and managers, fostering communal behaviours amongst labourers and—through a process of earmarking—allowing for workers to direct a greater share of their wages toward household economies. We argue that this conception of thrift as labour actually reworks the way that consumption conjoins with production, challenging our received understandings of consumption, while also providing new possibilities for the creation of not only value, but also personhood.

The electric buzzer rings punctually at 11:55 am every day in Dapeng Factory, a small magnetic fastener manufacturer in the south-eastern Chinese city of Shenzhen.<sup>1</sup> On hearing the claxon, workers spread over several different floors and buildings swiftly down whatever hardware or parts they are handling and rush out of the workshop area, making their way toward the staff canteen located on the ground floor. Something of a silent race is on. Within

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<sup>1</sup> All individual names, along with that of the factory, have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to preserve participant confidentiality.

ten minutes of the bell ringing for break, they will have already descended the stairs, “punched out” of their morning shift by scanning their fingerprint at a digital attendance register located at the workshop entrance, jumped in line at the food counter to quickly fill their bowl with whatever is on offer for the day, wolfed it down in near silence before hurriedly washing their dishes and exiting the canteen.

The rush is on because those who manage to complete the above tasks in the shortest time will be first-in-line to claim an optimum standing position in the factory courtyard, just outside the factory owners’ former office space, which workers jokingly say is the best place from which to “scrounge the internet” (*cengwang*) by accessing the factory’s office Wi-Fi connection. While a stronger Wi-Fi signal is available inside the room itself—which has been converted into a rest area for use by the factory managers and senior technicians—normal production line workers are reluctant to enter, preferring to instead linger outside the door (Figure 1).

Obtaining a prime position to access the Wi-Fi network means workers can obtain faster download speeds and avoid expensive cellular data charges, making it easier for them to engage in activities directed towards earning small amounts of extra money and discounts across numerous online platforms—a practice often referred to in China as “pulling the sheep’s wool” (*haoyangmao*). Some read news on the smartphone app *Qutoutiao* (literally, “Interesting Headlines”), where users earn “credits” by reading articles that can be exchanged for Chinese Yuan (RMB). Others gain credits by tending to their virtual “orchards” (*guoyuan*) through a game built into the budget online shopping platform *Pinduoduo*, which can then be used to claim discounts off purchases. Some share customised links to Pinduoduo on their own social media profiles, hoping to earn virtual red envelopes that can also lead to price reductions. Many workers engage in several such practices simultaneously, flitting between different apps to complete these tasks, while also messaging friends and family, or

watching videos for entertainment. Although the volumes of money generated from completing these thrift activities are very small, many factory labourers maintain that if they invest enough time, sizeable amounts can be earned: “swipe enough credits, earn big money” (*shua henduo jinbi, zhuan daqian*), says one worker. Their commitment seems remarkable, given that long working hours and frequent overtime means that most workers’ daily “free-time” is effectively limited to a two-hour lunch break and a half-hour dinner break.

This paper will draw on participant observation and interview data gathered in Dapeng Factory to make sense of the social significance of these pulling the sheep’s wool activities. This expression, initially popularised in a comedy sketch featured in a national televised variety show (CCTV New Year’s Gala, 1999), originally sought to make light of thriftiness acting as a cover for the misappropriation of goods from collective era state-run production units. However, it has gained new meaning in recent years, owing to its subsumption into the nation’s rich repertoire of internet slang. Today, pulling the sheep’s wool refers to a wide-ranging constellation of practices, often conducted online, which suggest the emergence of a distinctive notion of thrift in contemporary China.

This paper examines how attempts made by Dapeng Factory workers to pull the sheep’s wool are of significance in redefining scholarly understandings of thrift, which have generally focused on the home, household management or domestic consumption. This has led to thrift being primarily understood as a guiding ethos and set of practices where the home stands as a relatively discrete economic unit and/or site of consumptive practice, often to the exclusion of wider sets of relations. Pulling the sheep’s wool turns such understandings on their head. These practices can be considered thrift in the sense that they allow money to be “saved” by offering price reductions, rewards or the opportunity to avoid spending one’s own money. However, at the same time, we argue that for Dapeng Factory workers, online thrift is primarily understood as a form of labour, chiefly concerned with earning (rather than

saving) money. This imbues thrift with a potency that allows it to be put to use by workers in reshaping everyday rhythms and structures of factory life, challenging hierarchical labour relations and the production and consumption relationships they entail.

This does not, however, mean that thrift has become completely excised from the domestic sphere. Online thrift plays a key role in allowing migrant workers to sustain the homes and families they left behind in the Chinese countryside. It also provides a way to make dormitory life (as the place where workers predominantly live, despite not considering it their ‘home’) marginally more bearable. We argue that workers’ engagement in online thrift practices demonstrates the need to reconceptualise thrift as a concept capable of linking multiple domains of social life: production/consumption, earning/spending, home/workplace, leisure/work. We argue that workers’ conception of thrift as labour serves to reorganise the conjoining of consumption with production, in turn giving rise to unique opportunities for the construction of not just value, but also personhood.

The first section of this paper examines the relationship between thrift and the home. It notes how, despite an increasing recognition of thrift as a consumptive practice, the domestic sphere remains strongly imbricated in scholarly understandings of thrift. The second section describes the methods used in this study. The third section discusses how factory workers regard thrift to be a form of “easy” work, albeit in the service of technology companies rather than factory bosses. The fourth section considers how online thrift practices constitute a mode of organisational misbehaviour, through which workers seek to redress perceived instances of being short-changed at the hands of factory management. The fifth section describes workers’ earmarking of the “extra money” earned from online thrift, through which they foster communality amongst co-workers, while also allowing for the greater channelling of factory wages towards their own household economies. The paper concludes by reflecting on how the case of Dapeng Factory prompts us to view thrift not as a

chiefly domestic concern, but instead as being central to the “complex monetary ecologies” (Maurer, 2015: 48) of factory workers’ lives and discusses the implications of online thrift for our understanding of consumption.

### **Thrift: There’s no place like home?**

In their study of the transformation of thrift in American society, Yates and Hunter (2011) note how, for many, thrift primarily exists as a virtue of necessity—a means for the accumulation of personal wealth in the face of material constraints. However, they also point out that thrift possesses other qualities: acting as an avenue for the creation of social goods by groups (i.e. mass philanthropy, collective thrift) and a concept embedded in the changing culture of Western capitalism and the moral economy of the self. Tracing thrift back to Calvinism and the emergence of the protestant ethic, they argue the concept “was an invention of early modernity, as a critical component in the emergence of a market economy” and, as such, is “essentially unintelligible outside of the way of life represented by early modern and modern capitalism” (Yates and Hunter, 2011: 9).

While the ethos of thrift appears fundamental to the market economy, anthropology and sociology have been at pains to point out how the home is often central to notions of thrift. Gudeman and Rivera’s (1990) ethnographic study of peasant households in rural Colombia describes a distinct separation between thrift practices in the “house economy” of rural homes and the “corporate economy” of the market. In the former, limiting unnecessary expenditures created “leftovers” which could be kept in the home in order to avoid households having to engage in the market; in the latter, savings could be further invested with the aim of generating a return.

This bifurcating approach was challenged by Miller (1998) who critiqued Gudeman and Rivera’s failure to compare “between the peasant house and the household under

capitalism as units of consumption” (Miller, 1998: 133). In his ethnographic study of London supermarket shoppers, Miller challenges the portrayal of thrift as a practical response to material constraints, demonstrating how it is engaged in by all persons, regardless of social and class backgrounds. He advocates for seeing thrift as an “end to itself”, describing participants who were “going shopping in order to have the experience of saving money” (Miller, 1998: 61). Miller argued that for his North London participants, the house no longer acted as a metaphor for lineage and inter-generational descent (à la Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995), and instead now functioned as a concept chiefly enacted through thrift activities. This led Miller to conclude that “thrift has come to supplant the house itself as the process by which economic activity is used to create a moral framework for the construction of value” (Miller, 1998: 137).

Scholars have sought to further develop Miller’s findings by exploring how thrift practices mark out membership of family units (Cappellini and Parsons, 2012) or can contain elements of hedonism (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005; Chancellor and Lyubomirsky, 2011). Generally speaking, however, the home has remained an important focus for studies of thrift, albeit increasingly understood to function primarily a site of consumption. There are some important exceptions in this regard, including studies considering the role of thrift in the social construction of banking products (Lehtonen and Pantzar, 2002) and health insurance (Schwarz, 2019). This suggests the possibility of thrift operating in financial products in ways relatively distanced from the domestic sphere, although these authors have not expounded on such questions in detail.

The question of how wedded thrift ought to be to the home is particularly relevant in China, where historical accounts emphasise thrift as carrying far-reaching implications for society as a whole, rather than just the domestic sphere. One of the most pertinent native concepts is *jiejian*, meaning “thrift” or “frugality”. Kieschneck (2003) notes the promotion of

frugal restraint and a distaste of inappropriate displays of wealth were qualities that have been valorised throughout Chinese ancient history. Confucius urged feudal lords to be “attentive to affairs and trustworthy, frugal in expenditures and sparing of others” (Confucius, 2007: 16). During the upheavals of the Maoist era, frugality became a central tenet of Maoist thought, alongside a denouncing of individual selfishness and a devotion to society (Walder, 1987).

Chinese notions of thrift experienced an upending from the beginning of the reform-and-opening-era onwards, as consumptive ability increasingly came to be regarded as an indicator for and means of realising social status (Davis, 2000; Osburg, 2013; Yang, 1994; Yu, 2014). Responding to these prevailing attitudes, scholars have questioned whether the growing materialism seen in Chinese society (especially amongst younger persons) is responsible for a decline in the cultural significance afforded to thrift (Chan et al., 2006; Podoshen et al., 2011). Perhaps most notably, a study by Lin et al. (2013) marries indigenous notions of “face” (*mianzi*) with those of thrift, arguing that thrift is rarely practiced in the public sphere for fear of appearing miserly, while instead dominating in the private sphere of the home.

Taken together, the above studies demonstrate that beyond simply saving money, thrift also represents a moral concept, disposition and set of practices. While central to the market economy, thrift has also remained closely associated with the home. Dapeng Factory workers’ efforts to pull the sheep’s wool through earning money online (an action which they maintain facilitates the saving of money), while being physically located in their workplace appears wholly distinct from established notions of thrift and therefore constitutes an important avenue for scholarly analysis.

## Fieldwork in a factory

The findings presented in this paper emerge from participant observation carried out by the authors at Dapeng Factory between November 2017 and October 2018 as part of a project seeking to comprehend the social impact of digital money for Chinese migrant labourers.<sup>2</sup> Selection of Dapeng Factory as a field site was influenced by the study's objective of understanding how different demographics of factory workers responded to new monetary technologies. In contrast to the city's mammoth high-tech electronics factories, which employed tens of thousands of predominantly younger workers, the small hundred-person strong workforce of Dapeng Factory had a heterogeneous mix of labourers, spanning both gender divisions, as well as younger (i.e. late teens, twenties) and middle (i.e. thirties, forties and fifties) age ranges.<sup>3</sup> The second author's personal connections with the factory management also facilitated our research activities, affording us comparative freedom to roam the factory and interact with employees.

Several participants who had formerly worked in intensive electronics factories such as Foxconn<sup>4</sup> remarked that although salaries at Dapeng Factory were comparatively lower, its supervision regime was more "human-based" (*renxinghua*).<sup>5</sup> While tensions still existed between workers and the management (to be elaborated more fully later), workers nonetheless appreciated the extra freedoms this management style afforded them.

The effects of this perceived human-based management regime were also felt in workers' living arrangements. While large-scale factories often sought to discourage the formation of worker solidarity by avoiding housing workers together if they shared common

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<sup>2</sup> <http://sociology.hku.hk/digital-money-china>

<sup>3</sup> Despite their size, such "small workshop factories" (*xiao zuofang*) are actually relatively commonplace in manufacturing zones across China. The general manager of Dapeng Factory claimed that approximately 800 other similarly-sized factories existed in the 37 square kilometre subdistrict (*jiedao*) in which they were located.

<sup>4</sup> Foxconn is a Taiwanese-owned electronics manufacturer that operates several factories in Shenzhen, producing devices for Apple, Huawei, Motorola and others.

<sup>5</sup> The minimum pay for Dapeng Factory workers was 2,200 RMB (\$330 USD) per month, although after overtime workers could earn between 3,000 (\$450 USD) and 5,000 RMB (\$750 USD) per month.

kinship connections or places of origin (*tongxiang*) (Pun, 2016), at Dapeng Factory one of the dormitory blocks was specifically reserved for married couples (where both workers were factory employees), enabling them to cohabit with their spouses. Two such couples also had children living with them in the dormitory, who attended school in the city. Shared place of origin also connected a significant number of workers (including one of the senior managers), all of whom come from a single village in the far east of the Guangdong province. While no workers ever described regarding the factory as their “home”, these arrangements nonetheless point to the presence of inchoate forms of domesticity.

Although the initial focus of our digital money study had been popular payment platforms such as Alipay and WeChat Wallet, we soon realised that workers were preoccupied with collecting various credits and discounts on online platforms. Despite happening upon these thrift practices by chance, we quickly recognised their importance in embodying migrant workers’ economic concerns and aspirations. In response, we dedicated further efforts to the investigation and analysis of this phenomena.

Our participant observation with workers occurred within the factory itself, across workshop, dormitory, canteen, office and courtyard spaces. This engagement facilitated casual interactions between researchers and participants, while also providing opportunities to observe quotidian factory life. This was complemented by more formal interviews with participants, directed at eliciting their views on these thrift-related practices. The authors visited the factory about once every fortnight throughout the fieldwork period. While the second author took a leading role in data collection, the first author was largely responsible for the writing of the article. Analysis of fieldwork data was a collaborative process between the authors.

### **“Earning money”: The leisurely labour of online thriftiness**

During the initial stages of fieldwork, a craze spread amongst workers for collecting credits on the news platform Qutoutiao. Qutoutiao publishes tabloid-style articles centred on topics such as current affairs, entertainment, food, health, home improvement and horoscope predictions. Users earn around ten virtual “gold coins” (*jinbi*) by visiting a single awarding news article and scrolling down to the end of the page. Every midnight, the gold coins collected by users in the preceding 24 hours are automatically converted to a Chinese Yuan (RMB) value based on a fluctuating exchange rate, supposedly determined by the revenue of the company that owns the platform. At the start of fieldwork, the exchange rate hovered around 1,600 coins to 1 RMB (\$0.15 USD).<sup>6</sup> When workers’ RMB-value credit on Qutoutiao reaches 30 RMB (\$4.5 USD)—a process which typically involves the conscientious use of lunchbreaks over a period of several months—they can withdraw the money to WeChat Wallet, a prominent and widely-used digital payment platform.

Although earning money through Qutoutiao involves a considerable investment of time when one considers the small sums to be gained, it nonetheless has special significance to participants in that they regard it to be “easy work”, at least in comparison to their production line job, or to supplementary forms of labour available to them. The idea that one can “easily earn money by reading the news” (*kan xinwen jiuneng qingsong zhuanqian*) is espoused in Qutoutiao’s official marketing materials and has been instrumental in attracting over 62 million monthly active users to the platform, many of whom hail from small cities or the countryside (Yang, 2018).

The labour-like nature of thrift-oriented activities such as Qutoutiao was also evident in the revealing vocabulary workers used to describe consuming news through the platform. When workers were asked how they spent their free time, many simply answered “looking at

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<sup>6</sup> At the start of fieldwork, \$1 USD was approximately equal to 6.6 RMB.

the news” (*kankan xinwen*), or even more pointedly, “swiping the news” (*shuashua xinwen*). As opposed to the more formal expression “reading the news” (*du xinwen*), workers’ responses imply merely skimming of the articles, rather than deeply engaging with content. When interviewed, most admitted to quickly scrolling through articles, primarily motivated by the cash reward given when reaching the bottom of the screen.

While workers regard earning money on Qutoutiao and other similar platforms as being work-like, it remains more appealing than other forms of supplemental labour open to them, which are generally felt to be “exhausting” (*xinku*) and “tiring” (*lei*). For instance, some female production line workers sought out take-home piecemeal “handwork” (*shougong*, literally “hand labour”) from other factories located nearby, which they would subsequently complete in their own dormitory rooms during evenings or on Sundays (when the production line shuts down). This work often involved repetitive, manual tasks (e.g. stuffing soft toys) that could be completed without the need for specialist equipment.

Workers evaluated online thrift practices against these other kinds of supplemental labour, as demonstrated by Wang Li and Wang Xiaoting, a married couple in their forties, who had both worked together in Dapeng Factory—albeit on different parts of the production line—for more than 12 years. On most Sundays, Xiaoting, occupies herself with handwork in their shared dormitory room while her husband Li perches at the end of their bed, phone in hand, gathering coins on Qutoutiao. Li would typically earn around 1 RMB (\$0.15 USD) in a day from swiping the news, whereas Xiaoting might expect to receive 10-20 RMB (\$1.51-3.02 USD) for her engagement in handwork. Neither partner viewed the difference in earnings to be problematic, given that Li commands a higher hourly wage for his work on the production line during the rest of the week. In fact, Xiaoting commented that merely having her husband sit alongside her doing something “productive” during their “day off” was

enough to motivate her to persevere in her supplementary labour, when she might otherwise have been tempted to rest.

Although many workers expressed an interest in taking on handwork, most found that the demands their production line work placed upon them was already overwhelming. As such, many elected to spend their Sundays relaxing in dormitory rooms, watching dramas on their phones, chatting online with friends and family, or visiting places outside the factory. Earning a little extra money through online platforms slotted around these activities easily. As another worker, Li Wanyun, explained “With doing handwork you really have to ‘do’ it, it’s very much like being on shift. But doing Qutoutiao, it’s just play”.

Such attitudes reveal how while participants considered online thrift activities to be work-like in nature, they frequently took place during leisure time and were regarded as entertaining and relatively undemanding. Many of these thrift-oriented activities are highly “gamified”. For example, on Qutoutiao animated gold coins cascade onto users’ screens when they reach the end of an article. Pinduoduo’s virtual orchard game is a farming simulation where users tend to fruit online, or can even “steal” the harvest of other users (some workers will wake up in the middle of the night to do so!). Workers engagement in these online thrift activities during moments between shifts thus satisfies another of workers’ concerns: that their leisure time should be somewhat productive. As Yan Linlin, a worker in the factory told us “During free time you want to do something meaningful (*you yiyi*), if there’s money [to be earned], then it’s meaningful!”.

Linlin’s quote reveals how workers’ engagement in factory labour has increasingly led them to view their own free time in monetary terms. Most have internalised a working-class ethos that sees money as something earned through sustained efforts. This is in contrast to the managerial labour of factory administrators (who earn higher wages than factory workers despite sitting in the office all day) and also to forms of speculative behaviour (e.g.

buying stocks, gambling). Workers devoted great efforts to ensuring their monthly salaries matched the hours they actually worked, carrying out detailed calculations upon receiving their monthly payslips.

Of course, workers' participation in pulling the sheep's wool activities formed an integral part of the platforms' own business models. Many of the fledgling technology companies behind these platforms relied on advertising, or successive rounds of angel investment in order to sustain their operations. Showing growing numbers of monthly active users engaging with a platform often plays a central role in attracting advertisers and investors alike. Workers' labouring on the platforms thus also produces a form of value for the platform itself. It is noteworthy that no workers ever alluded to such business models when asked why they thought the platforms might be awarding them money. In fact, several workers believed that the platforms must be receiving a "kickback" (*huikou*) from the telecom companies (who profited when workers purchased bandwidth allowances) in recognition of the increased data use resulting from their provision of addictive online thrift activities.

In his classic study *Manufacturing Consent*, Burawoy (1979) argues that workers in a Chicago piecework machine factory engage in "games" on the shopfloor, through which they become complicit in their own exploitation. Burawoy describes how, rather than conflict occurring between management and labourers, discord instead appears amongst workers themselves, who develop informal rules as they "make out" to compete for individual incentive bonuses. In so doing, workers' engagement in labour constitutes a form of "voluntary servitude" which reproduces the relations of capitalist productions. In Dapeng Factory, workers treat these online thrift activities as forms of productive labour, which they are willing to engage in despite knowing that their efforts were primarily creating "surplus value" for the technology companies who operated these platforms. This arguably

represented a form of voluntary servitude which echoed that described by Burawoy, albeit in the service of the online thrift platforms, rather than the factory bosses.

### **Pulling the wool of the boss' sheep**

The leisurely quality of online thrift, whether through the gamified nature of collecting credits, or the informal rules that workers created around such practices, spoke clearly to a number of underlying tensions between management and production line employees that prevailed in Dapeng Factory. Workers' gripes about the factory administration rarely surfaced as overt displays of discontent or through forms of collective action. Instead, activities around online thrift tied into a mutual and ongoing process of acquiescent reclamation of the other party's time, money and property aimed at settling perceived prior miscalculations, intentional or otherwise. Importantly, such informal practices largely went unchallenged by Dapeng Factory's management. In this sense, online thrift practices speak to Ackroyd and Thompson's description of "organisational misbehaviour" as "a co-production between the parties to the employment relationship" in which "there are usually some elements of accommodation, toleration and complicity over the definition and perceived dynamics of these events" (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2015: 191).

Workers' dissatisfaction with the factory management generally centred on perceptions that while their bosses at Dapeng Factory were not seen as particularly exploitative (compared to those of, say, large-scale intensive electronics factories), they were, however, less generous than they perhaps could be, seeking to maximise profits by scrimping and saving on employee costs wherever possible. For instance, female worker Wu Yuyan (whose case will be discussed more fully later) complains that her pay check is always rounded down to the nearest whole number, bemoaning how while losing these valuable fractions of an RMB actually mean a lot to her, they are likely to be of relative insignificance

to her wealthy boss. Workers also complain about the quality of the canteen food, alleging that the chef is lining his own pockets with the money he receives for purchasing ingredients, but that he manages to escape punishment thanks to his close friendship with one of the junior bosses. Unlike other factories, management also do not organise company-subsidised outings, or provide workers with annual bonuses or gifts (such as mooncakes or *zongzi*) during major festivals. Workers cite all of these phenomena as evidence of their bosses' miserly nature, making them feel at liberty to pursue recompense, with online thrift activities forming a key avenue through which to do so.

This is arguably where the notion of pulling the sheep's wool requires further elaboration. The phrase was initially popularized through a comedy sketch that featured in the *CCTV New Year's Gala* (1999) variety show, aired on national television during the 1999 Spring Festival celebrations. Although space limitations prevent us from describing the sketch in full here, the salient moment concerns an elderly rural lady (played by actress Song Dandan) recalling how, during the collective era, she wooed her then husband-to-be by knitting him a sweater using wool misappropriated from the sheep owned by her production team (*shengchan dui*), which she had been delegated the task of shepherding.<sup>7</sup> On discovering her misdemeanour, the production team organised a struggle session (*pidouhui*). However, rather than charging her with the standard offence of "undermining the foundations of socialism" (*wa shehuizhuyi qiangjiao*) they instead concocted the preposterous-sounding charge of "pulling the wool of socialism's sheep" (*hao shehuizhuyi yangmao*).

While the original story of pulling the wool of socialism's sheep sought to make light of commonplace collective-era practices whereby workers and production unit leaders hid, under-reported or misappropriated goods intended for extraction and control by the state, the

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<sup>7</sup> Production teams were the basic accounting unit in China's people's commune system, in operation between 1958 and 1984.

expression has re-emerged in recent years, given new meaning through its appearance in internet memes and popular culture. Today, pulling the sheep's wool can still denote frugal thriftiness, however other variants have also emerged, including “pulling the wool of the bank's sheep” (*hao yinhang de yangmao*) and—suggesting the term has come somewhat full circle—“pulling the wool of capitalism's sheep” (*hao zibenzhuyi yangmao*). These novel variants typically refer to middle-class practices of taking advantage of special offers from banks or using points collected through credit card spending to claim further discounts or free rewards. While low-income individuals such as Dapeng Factory workers were rarely eligible for such promotions, digital platforms like Qutoutiao and Pinduoduo were responding to workers' desires to partake in such practices by incorporating online thrift activities into their products. On their part, Dapeng Factory workers were engaging in online thrift practices not only to gain discounts from online retailers, but also as a way to misappropriate various resources from their bosses in the factory.

Although factory management were generally willing to turn a blind eye when it came to workers' appropriation of the office Wi-Fi signal, or their moonlighting by using their leisure time to undertake extra labour, their attitude was far less accommodating when it came to worker's formal shift hours being appropriated for engaging in such activities. Some workers were so pre-occupied with earning through online thrift that they felt it necessary to sneak their phones into the workshop in order to tend to their numerous accounts. The bosses had for some time mandated a ban on mobile phone use on the production line, as evidenced by a poster displayed on the noticeboard outside the manager's former office, dated August 2017, which read:

A Hong Kong client came to inspect the factory and discovered several employees playing on their mobile phones during work time. The company has now resolved that a 50 RMB (\$7.57 USD) fine will apply if people are

discovered to be playing, or doing activities unrelated to work, on their phones during shift periods. We expect everyone to comply!

However, this did not deter workers from trying to earn various forms of credit while on shift, especially since online credit-bearing activities often demanded constant user input. Several apps awarded credits to users for “checking in” (*qiandao*) each day by pressing a button located on the app home screen (a procedure somewhat similar to that seen when workers “clocked on” to their shift by scanning their thumbprint at the attendance registration machine located by the workshop entrance). Pinduoduo required users to constantly tend to the fruit in their virtual orchard by adding water and fertiliser. We often observed workers, preoccupied with earning credits, using their phones while on shift, keeping them on their lap so as to avoid scrutiny from managers, despite the factory having already installed surveillance cameras accross the entire shopfloor area. Some workers even smuggled in mobile phone chargers, making use of electrical outlets hidden behind machinery to charge their devices (an activity they felt was justifiable, given that the factory overcharged workers for the electricity they consumed in their own dormitory rooms). Towards the end of fieldwork the management began to insist that production line workers locked away their phones before entering the shopfloor, arranging for the installation of two cabinets, each of which contained 40 individual lockers sized at the right dimensions for storing a smartphone (Figure 2).

Some participants also often intentionally left their workstations early in order to reclaim time their employer had assigned for work, instead turning it into productive leisure time for themselves. The buzzer signalling the end of the morning and afternoon shifts rings at 11:55 am and 5:55 pm respectively, allowing workers five minutes to pack away their workbenches before their break officially starts. However, in practice workers started to shut down the machines, go to the toilet and pack up their personal belongings an extra five to ten

minutes beforehand. These individuals were often already stood on the threshold of the workshop exit well before the buzzer rang out, giving them a few valuable extra minutes to “scrounge” the office Wi-Fi before the official start of their break, at which point they would scan their thumbprint so as to ensure that the employer’s digital records indicated they had worked a full shift. In this way, workers were effectively relocating break activities into their work time. By using online thrift as a reason for sneaking their phones onto the production line, stealing the company’s electricity supply and finishing their shift before time, workers were arguably “pulling the wool of the boss’ sheep” (*hao laoban yangmao*) through their appropriation of the management’s time, money and resources—all of which they already regarded as having been taken unjustly from them. However, part of the reason that these forms of organisational misbehaviour were tolerated by the factory management can be attributed to the opposing logics surrounding money generated through online thrift, which asserts a distinction between “big money” (*daqian*) and “small money” (*xiaoqian*). This allows managers to dismiss the activities of workers engaging in online thrift as insignificant, while simultaneously empowering workers to assert the value of their own thrift-oriented practices.

Production line worker Ma Lijuan, who was in her early twenties, had little doubt over the importance of what she referred to as “small money”. She spent much of her free time accumulating credits on news, video, shopping and mobile fiction apps . Lijuan described how, given the soaring cost of living in cities like Shenzhen, it was vital to pay attention to caring for small money, because it had the potential to eventually accumulate into big money. Li Juan recounted the idiom “now it is a drop of water, but in the end, there will be a day when it is a bowl of water” (*xianzai shi yidi shui, danzong hui you yitian shi yiwan shui*). Lijuan’s attitude to “small money” demonstrates the capacity of thrift to act as a form of deferment (Miller, 1998), in that she is able to delay immediate rewards in anticipation of

an imagined future. Invoking such discourses allowed Lijuan to assert her own status as a morally responsible financial actor.

In contrast, senior workers and managers also drew on the distinction of small and big money to illustrate the differences they perceived to exist between themselves and production line employees. Managers dismissed workers' online thrift practices as insignificant, arguing that the trifling sums of "small money" generated from such activities demonstrated their inconsequential nature. Managers regarded production line workers' enthusiasm for online thrift as confirmation that workers were "without knowledge and experience" (*meiyou jianshi*).<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the "games" that Burawoy (1979) describes machine shop workers mutually engaging in as part of their "voluntary servitude" towards managers, the informal practices surrounding Dapeng Factory workers' efforts to pull the sheep's wool instead constituted attempts to push back, albeit in a relatively minor way, against the factory regime. While workers often engaged in these activities alongside each other, they also did not seem to provoke the kind of "ethos of co-operation and esprit de corps" seen in descriptions of shopfloor games amongst American autoworkers (Dudley, 1994: 111). Instead, as a form of organisational misbehaviour that was co-produced by both workers and managers alike, the practices surrounding online thrift served to reaffirm the social divisions between these two groups. However, because online thrift itself continued to be considered work-like and led to money being "earned", it also became a route for workers to deny the factory management access to their own productive labour, while simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of such value-creating labour to themselves as individuals.

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<sup>8</sup> In reality, managers also frequently engaged in pulling the sheep's wool activities themselves. However, these activities further extenuated class differences between workers and management, as the kinds of online thrift practiced by management (for instance, accumulating points through credit card spending) generally pertained to higher value items.

### **Earmarking thrift: co-worker communality and saving wages for home**

While the distinction between small and big money served to make clear the disparate value systems held by management and workers, it was their classification of money earned through online thrift as being “extra money” (*e'wai qian*), and as such distinct from their factory wages, that became instrumental in workers’ management of their relationships with their own households, and each other. Workers believed that extra money earned through online thrift ought to be spent on consumption that could be shared with other co-workers, allowing them to leave their main salary untouched in order that it may be dedicated to their own families and households.

Zelizer’s (2017) description of earmarking is helpful in making sense of how workers differentiate between money earned through online thrift activities and wage labour, especially given their insistence that accumulation of the former allows them to leave the latter untouched. Zelizer notes how money—which is often regarded as being universal and absolutely interchangeable—is in fact socially differentiated through specific earmarking practices dictating how it should be used or kept. This process, she argues, is morally charged, with conflict often occurring over how money ought to be marked. In the case of production line workers in Dapeng Factory, the moral imperative that this “extra money” should be put towards minor consumptive pleasures for oneself and one’s co-workers builds a communality that operates alongside the hierarchical relations existing between management and workers which, as has been shown, was simultaneously being contested through these very same practices.

One example of the significance of such earmarking practices came from Wu Yuyan, a female worker in her mid-forties. Yuyan lived in the main dormitory building, sharing a room with several co-workers and apart from her husband, who was employed in a different factory elsewhere in the city. Due to her husband’s gambling addiction, Yuyan exercised

particular care in managing money, always keeping savings in reserve in case of unforeseen expenses. Yuyan diligently dedicated time each day to collecting gold coins on Qutoutiao and discounts on Pinduoduo.

Despite the fact that coins collected through Qutoutiao could be used to purchase virtually anything once they had been exchanged into RMB-value digital money and stored in WeChat Wallet, Yuyan insisted that she only used money earned through this channel for buying “daily necessities” (*richang yongpin*)—a broad category including snacks, tissues, condiments, cheap houseware or even basic cooking equipment—on the online retailer Pinduoduo. Yuyan maintained that she could usually earn a further 8 RMB (\$1.21 USD) worth of discounts a month by engaging in thrift-oriented activities on Pinduoduo itself, such as collecting virtual red envelopes, checking in and sharing product advertisements with friends via her own WeChat profile page.

Yuyan would normally begin to make plans about what particular items she hopes to purchase on Pinduoduo even before she had accumulated enough credit to claim a discount. On one occasion, Yuyan explained how she had for months been eyeing up a multipack of pocket-sized facial tissues, priced at 12 RMB (\$1.82 USD). The tissues she previously bought on Pinduoduo were of such low quality that on this occasion she had resolved to increase her budget for this item, but only by 2 RMB (\$0.15 USD). When she successfully amassed 10 RMB (\$3.03 USD) worth of credit on Pinduoduo, she exchanged it for a digital discount voucher, immediately redeeming it against a pack of tissues. She paid for the transaction with WeChat Wallet, settling the outstanding 2 RMB (\$0.15 USD) with money stored on the payment platform which she had previously earned from swiping news articles on Qutoutiao. Reflecting on the whole process, Yuyan felt she had made considerable savings by combining monies generated from different online thrift activities.

Many workers maintained that the money generated from engagement in online thrift ought to be spent on items that would deliver the kinds of small pleasures that could make factory life more tolerable. Despite Yuyan's insistence that the goods she bought on Pinduoduo using money accumulated through online thrift activities were "daily necessities" (*richang yongping*), this term was something of a misnomer. Such items were in fact generally regarded as small indulgences, often intended for sharing with co-workers. For instance, Yuyan had planned that, after purchasing her pocket-sized tissues, she would store them for the rare occasions that she left the factory on days out with friends, given that they were easy to carry and share around when needed. By contrast, she kept large rolls of cheaper toilet paper in her dormitory room for her own everyday use. In another example, many workers used money earned through online thrift to purchase snack foods and condiments such as spicy sauces to enliven the bland meals served in the canteen, sharing these with their colleagues.

Yuyan also described how the "extra money" earned through these platforms allowed her to avoid spending as much of her monthly salary, which could instead be channelled towards meeting various household expenses, such as caring for her elderly relatives and paying for her sons' tuition fees. Yuyan's case demonstrates how the extra income generated from online thrift activities is often intentionally kept separate from workers' own household economies and domestic expenses, which are chiefly maintained through their factory wages, paid in the form of cash or by direct deposit into workers' bank accounts. The earmarked nature of this money was further confirmed by the decision of many workers (including Yuyan) to avoid linking their WeChat Wallet accounts to their bank accounts—thus spurning the intended design of the platform as a general purpose payment platform—instead using the app exclusively for the storing and spending of money earned through thrift.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars have often dismissed thrift as being somewhat trivial, a primarily domestic practice driven by purely economic concerns. However, Dapeng Factory workers' efforts to "pull the sheep's wool" by engaging in online thrift has revealed the deployment of the concept in settings that are seemingly far removed from the home, domestic management and family economics. We have witnessed thrift being utilised in the context of workers' relationships with other co-workers, factory management, the companies operating online platforms and even (through the earmarking of unspent wages) their own family members. In so doing, thrift's capacity for mediating exchanges that straddle domains of work/leisure, employer/employee, workplace/home, production/consumption and online/offline become visible.

Aside from challenging received scholarly understandings of thrift, we argue that acknowledging its multi-valent dimensions can have broader ramifications for studies of consumptive culture, illuminating thrift as a recurrent experience that is an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary social life. While Miller's (1998) study of supermarket shopping practices argued that thrift represented an "end to itself", creating a moral framework for the construction of value, the relevance of our own study for helping to understand consumption goes one step further. The Dapeng Factory case not only confirms that consumption can be as much about the act of saving as it is about the act spending, it also takes this beyond issues of value creation alone. For it is participants' assertion that in addition to being a consumptive practice, thrift can also be a form of work and can thereby act as a concept through which labour relations are reconstructed. This, in turn, provides the possibility for the value produced through engagement in thrift to coalesce into more concrete perspectives on one's productive capacity and social positioning. It is our argument, therefore, that this conception of thrift as labour actually reworks the way that consumption

conjoins with production, challenging our received understandings of what consumption is, and the kinds of personhood that can emerge from this process.

Efforts to open out the study of thrift towards diverse areas of sociality and social experience must also be accompanied by consideration of its flourishing across radically different cultural contexts. The case of Dapeng Factory workers contributes to a growing body of scholarship (Nelson, 2000; Schlecker, 2005; Ang, 2019; Stillerman, 2016) highlighting the distinctive symbolic meanings of thrift in cultural settings beyond Europe and North America. Our study calls into question generalising assumptions that the growth of materialistic consumption in China has resulted from the diminished importance of thrift to its peoples. Not only has this paper demonstrated that is thrift alive and well in Chinese culture, the concept has gained new meaning and increased importance through its migration onto the country's digital platforms. Dapeng Factory does not, of course, represent all thrift practices occurring within China. However, it forms a valuable point of reference to aid future cross-cultural comparisons of thrift in both local and international contexts.

The digitisation of thrift carries important consequences for both consumptive practices and social relations. As thrift becomes increasingly integrated into everyday online platforms, retailers and merchants are afforded novel possibilities for the creation of new forms of value through the invention of a plethora of credits, vouchers, and tokens. As scholars seeking to understand these flourishing regimes of value, which increasingly converge with technologies of everyday communication, it becomes vitally important to pay attention to the kinds of social engagement these generate amongst consumers, along with the role that individuals themselves play in imbuing thrift with meaning and social purpose.

## **Acknowledgments**

Our thanks go to Zhang Chaoxiong, David Palmer, Priscilla Song, Jens Zickgraf and the journal's anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

## **Funding**

The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. HKU 27606617).



Figure 1. Workers standing in factory courtyard while using their phones



Figure 2. Factory workers standing in front of phone storage lockers

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