

Yuanfeng's Story

Story written by Zhang Yuanfeng



Illustration by Xue Xu. @yumigou_

Yuanfeng is a frontline worker in the Food delivery app industry.

2018 was the year when I, a then newly licensed G2 driver, steadfastly entered the food delivery industry under the recommendation of a friend. As a student who wasn't too confident with English, the requirements of working as a delivery app driver for a Chinese company seemed relatively low. Since I wasn't yet familiar with road conditions or the locations of businesses, I moved slowly with my food deliveries in the first year. This was a time when investment capital brought by numerous delivery platform companies rushed onto the market, and I hoped that it would be here that I too, would carve a path for myself. Friends around me who were delivery app drivers were making up to \$300-350 a day.

For a new driver like me, each day on the road was a chance to experience Canada's awe-inspiring scenery and the unique, local characteristics of North American culture (for instance, the notable tipping culture and the traffic and safety awareness signs seen

on the roads). I also got to meet and interact with people from all walks of life. This certainly helped me integrate more into Canadian life. Plus, all you need to do take-out delivery work is a driver's license, a car and a smartphone. In the eyes of many people, this really is a promising new entrepreneurial opportunity.

Then in 2020, the pandemic enveloped the globe. Sectors of every kind experienced a downturn, some on the verge of shattering, even collapsing in a bang. The take-out delivery industry was also hit and problems surfaced. The client base of Chinese delivery platforms is, for the most part, made up of international students who face enormous pressures from the costs of education and rent, in search of quick and convenient meals. The

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pandemic resulted in many international students returning to China to work or continue their classes online. Besides this reduction in the customer base, many people lost their jobs during the pandemic and also joined the food delivery app industry. In the fierce competition between platforms,

reduced delivery charges appeared like an attractive adjustment, but in reality, it was done at the expense of delivery drivers' incomes.

Chinese delivery platforms' blurring of the distinction between self-employment (independent contractor) and employment for drivers is based entirely on the companies' self-interest. Having self-employed drivers, allows the company to not pay taxes, auto-insurance, retirement benefits, vacation pay or workers' compensation. They can also shift the responsibility of communicating with customers onto the drivers. Yet under the terms of self-employment, drivers are still required to strictly follow the company's rules and regulations.

For instance, accurately reporting when you start and finish a shift, punching out during mealtime, wearing the company uniform, using the company delivery

carrying case, and having a car sticker on your vehicle with the company logo on it. If there was a traffic accident, insurance companies can deny the drivers' claims on the grounds that the car is used for business purposes and dispute it through a long,

drawn-out case. If a driver was caught working without the company's designated carrying case, car sticker or uniform by the manager, they would receive a fine of \$50. The money you've earned after a long day's work goes immediately back to the employer.

For the sake of customer comfort and satisfaction, and to stand out amongst the many delivery platforms, drivers must complete orders within the specified timeframes. Drivers often joke: "Business owners may be slow with a meal order, but traffic on the road can be slow just as well." If something goes wrong, the employer has three

up with this over-saturated market, most of us working drivers will only have enough orders to be busy during the peak meal hours, all other times there are few orders to

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A rectangular dark green bag on a seat in a car. During his shifts Yuanfeng's company delivery bag rides in the passenger seat. Photo by Yuanfeng.

principles of denial: not knowing, not aware and not sure. The platform will have a way of using some sort of reason, however strange, to shift all the responsibility onto the driver.

Today, in the seriousness of the pandemic, drivers cannot but come equipped in full gear, complete with masks and gloves. Reluctantly putting

the restaurants, so we often get some extra soup and dishes with our meals.

Because we are racing against time, rushing to get the hot and piping meals delivered into customers' hands within the company's mandated time frame, the probability of getting a ticket when driving is much higher. Delivery drivers are often speeding.



Soup spilled on the way to the delivery destination. Top view into a plastic bag with two beverage bottles and food container. Photo by Yuanfeng

fill. One order an hour, sometimes none at all. When we're hungry and want to eat, we have to contact the manager and see if there are enough hands-on-deck at that moment, since, of course, there must always be one or two unfortunate people remaining vigilant at their posts. A good thing is that we have long befriended chefs at

Leaving your car for too long downstairs while delivering a meal to a customer's apartment can also result in parking tickets. I heard a friend say that these days, a hectic, exhausting 13 hour day will only earn you \$200. You get off work, rush home and eat, but can't help feeling that it was another trying day that ended with empty pockets.

Day and night, under winter's snowy skies and on icy skating-rink roads; in the summer's sweltering heat, sweat drenched back, for a bit of gas money - so little that I think twice about turning on the car's AC. These days when viruses are rampant, meet our cutest delivery boy who greets you with takeout. What remarkable energy sustains this young delivery boy, that he will not only work in such high-risk conditions, but also endure the platform's oppression and exploitation? I ask repeatedly, has the delivery industry in the past two years come to an end?