Live-Work

by Lin Zhang and Tu Lan

On the peripheries of global capitalism, home-based labor is far from an pandemic anomaly.

The newly constructed road along the bank of the Xiaoqing River is dotted with advertisements for Taobao, specifically tailored to peasants. “Tired of life as a migrant worker? Why not come home and work on Taobao.com?” read one on a recent trip. Another: “One cup of coffee and an Internet cable; stay at home and become an e-commerce entrepreneur, and your millionaire dream will come true.”

Chuan’s life is very different from what the wall advertisements describe. Formerly a migrant worker in a toy factory in South China, Chuan quit his job in Shenzhen to start an ecommerce business from his home in the Shandong Province with his wife, selling small hand-made furniture and home decorations made by local women. Though doing ecommerce is easier than working in the toy factory, he makes just enough money to support his family of five—far from becoming a millionaire. Besides an internet cable and a cup of coffee, he had to learn how to set up, decorate, and brand his online shop, and his day is packed with taking product pictures, talking to buyers online and on the phone, and analyzing e-store sales statistics. Evenings are also busy: he has to watch online tutorials taught by ecommerce gurus and take online photoshop classes to hone his design skills.

Thousands of miles away in central Italy, Chinese-language advertisements also decorate Via Pistoiese, the main street of Prato's Chinatown. The exterior walls of Prato's Chinese restaurants, hair salons, and supermarkets offer phone numbers that connect one to dorms and even prostitutes. There are no signs at all for Chinese garment shops—due to frequent police raids and increasingly hostile local sentiments, they've learned to hide themselves in back alleys.

Yuan, who was born in a village near Wenzhou, a city in the southeastern Zhejiang Province, spent years learning the garment trade and saving money before opening a small workshop in Prato, a town just northwest of Florence in central Italy, with her husband. (Since the pandemic, she and her husband have returned to China.) Besides working on the sewing machines, Yuan took care of recruitment and accounting, while her husband drove a small hatchback for product shipping and cooked for the entire crew. When orders came in, they often rotated on a twelve-hour shift, chatting with employees about the latest TV show or news in China, sometimes barely catching up with each other for days. They had no choice but to outsource childcare to their parents in China. For Yuan and her husband, the highlight of a long workday was video chatting on WeChat with their eight-year-old, and the best time of the year was reuniting with family members in China during their brief Lunar New Year trip.

Chuan and Yuan work in different industries, at different scales, and on different continents. (Both names have been changed.)

A ground floor garage-turned-workshop
run by a Chinese family in Prato

The home office of an ecommerce entrepreneur couple in Shandong Province

What they share is the experience of being entrepreneurial workers living and working from home on the peripheries of global capitalism. Home-based work has become a familiar arrangement to many people since the start of the pandemic in 2020, but Anglophone media discussion has mostly centered around the experiences of middle class professionals juggling life and work in one space. Home work, in these accounts, is often represented as a new or abnormal phenomenon that departs from the ordinary separation between home and office, life and work, productive and reproductive labor. But as the stories of Chuan and Yuan—and the many others like them—show, home-based work has long persisted on the peripheries of global capitalism, sustaining, yet rendered invisible to, the center in the Global North. Around the globe, home work never disappears; it simply moves around, often outsourced to "less developed" countries or "insourced" to domestic immigrants or workers with lower socioeconomic status.

It takes a Taobao Village

Home-based work has a long history in both Shandong Province and Prato, but Chuan and Yuan's particular experiences and arrangements are closely intertwined with the larger transformation of global production networks. Handicraft production—straw shoes, hand-braided cookware and kitchen utensils, small furniture, and home decorations—in Chuan's home county in Binzhou dates back to at least the seventh century BCE. Before the export industry emerged in the late Qing period (1636–1912), home-based production had served mostly family use, local market bartering, and some long-distance trading within China. But it was only after China's economic reform and opening up of the 1980s that the export industry started to boom, meeting global demand for low-price handmade products.

Women still made handicrafts at home in river bank villages outside of the county seat, but now they sold their work outside the home for piece rates: first, to collectively owned Town and Village Enterprises, and then, after privatization, to small family-owned and export-oriented handicraft manufacturing firms.

After the Global Financial Crisis, many migrant workers who had learned to use computers and the internet returned to their home villages, finding alternative opportunities to sell handicrafts online to domestic, rather than foreign, customers. As overseas demand for made-in-China handicrafts weakened, some younger villagers who had worked as either crafters or farmers followed suit. AliResearch, the research arm of Alibaba, coined the term "Taobao Villages" in 2010 to describe three villages where ecommerce self-employment had become a leading occupation; three years later, in June 2013, Chuan's village became one of the first batch of "Taobao Villages" officially declared by AliResearch.

The virtual economy of handicraft ecommerce targeting urban China's growing middle class was in the early stages of a growth that would gradually marginalize offline, export-oriented firms over the next decade. The home-based labor regime persisted, but the fruits of digitalization were unevenly distributed. Migrant returnees and a few urbanites who migrated to the villages for the ecommerce gold rush became the biggest winners. They are generally better educated and more attuned to urban consumer tastes, with the most successful entrepreneurs having earned college degrees in design and computer science. Home-based women weavers continued to labor under the same working conditions. While they saw a gradual, albeit slow, increase in earning, they also experienced the additional labor of adapting to the new rhythm of ecommerce production, where consumer tastes constantly shift and fluctuate.

A dorm room in the attic of the workshop

The room of a home-based women weaver in her 80s who makes products for ecommerce sales in Shandong Province

Since then, Taobao Villages and Towns have sprouted across the country, from a handful in 2013 to more than 7,000 as of early 2022, in a parallel to a reverse migration trend of urban migrant workers going back to the countryside. Rural digital entrepreneurship—mostly single-person or family businesses—has become an important drive in China's post-crisis restructuring of its export-oriented economic model to enhance indigenous innovation capacity, expand domestic consumption, and, more recently, to promote common prosperity and reduce urban-rural disparities. Key to this trend is home-based work. Mobilizing the familial division of labor for the digital economy in a "platformized family production" is a prevalent labor regime in rural Chinese ecommerce, which builds on the tradition of family-based agricultural and handicraft work in the Chinese countryside to reduce cost. In Chuan's case, his whole extended family is involved: his wife helps with customer service while taking care of their toddler, his dad packs and ships products, and his mom cooks and does other household chores.

Wenzhou in the Third Italy

The tradition of family-based home work is hardly unique to China or Chinese people. It's also made Prato a famous textile town since the Middle Ages. In home factories, generations of Pratese families made woolen velvets for the Medici in Florence and the Popes in Rome. At the height of Italy's post-war industrialization between the 1950s and 1970s, home work was still quite common among Italian workers and entrepreneurs, especially in Central Italy—"Third Italy," as researchers like to call it—home to countless family-run small and medium-sized enterprises, setting it apart from the mammoth auto plants of Piedmont or the idyllic olive farms of Sicily. Home work was concentrated in light industries like garments and textiles that were the backbone of Italy's export. To accommodate flexible production and to save costs, the family owners, many of whom recently migrated from the south of the country, built home factories where they and their employees could work and sleep in the same building.

In the 1970s and 1980s, these Italian family workshops temporarily outcompeted mass-production plants in places such as Detroit. However, by the 1990s, Italian companies started to outsource low-value-added manufacturing to low-income countries in Eastern Europe and Asia to cope with rising labor costs and the currency appreciation associated with the change from the Lira to the Euro. At the same time, pressure from labor unions and the declining importance of the textile industry in the national economy led the Italian authorities to gradually outlaw the use of home factories and traditional home work. The new zoning law required manufacturing space to be separated from residential areas, while the labor law, likely one of the strictest in the world, made working off-the-clock almost impossible. Meanwhile, the kids of the family business owners no longer tolerated the difficult home work that brought wealth to their parents; most left the manufacturing sector in this small town and sought easier office jobs in big cities. As a result, Prato, once the prototype of Italian flexible production, went into a recession in the 1990s.

Just as locals were about to call home-based factories history, Chinese immigrants came to give them a second life. The first wave of Chinese immigrants arrived at Prato in the late 1980s thanks to the opening up of China and favorable Italian immigration laws. Most of them came from the entrepreneurial and adventurous city of Wenzhou. Yuan was one of these aspiring entrepreneurs. Before coming to Italy, Yuan was a rural-to-urban migrant worker and had acquired her technical skills working for

A wall painted with phone numbers for advertisement several family-run garment factories in Zhejiang. In 1999, she joined her brother, who had settled two years earlier in Prato, to work in an Italian-run garment factory.

After a decade of hard work and frugal living, Yuan saved enough money to open her own garment workshop in 2009. They set up their home factory not just to follow the tradition both in Prato and in Wenzhou—this was also the most cost-efficient way to run a garment business in Italy. The Italian family who owned the house where she and her husband worked left the textile industry in the 1990s, and could not have been happier to lease the property to immigrant newcomers like Yuan. In Prato, she also met and married her husband, a Chinese coworker working at the same factory. Like her, tens of thousands of Wenzhounese migrant workers came to Prato hoping that one day they could also become their own boss. The number of garment businesses owned by Chinese nationals quickly increased from less than 100 in 1990 to over 3,000 in the mid-2010s.

In both Italy and China, as Chuan and Yuan's experiences show, home-based work regimes persist, usually involving precarious workers, and in industries with thin profit margins where every minute counts and "time off" is almost nonexistent. Despite its essential and indispensable role in the world economy today, the fact that home-based work is often associated with the marginalized—the working-class, women, immigrants/migrants, the elderly—has contributed to its invisibility and its public imagination as being "backward" and illegitimate, if not illegal. And yet, ironically, the informality of home-based work—the blurring between reproductive and productive labor, consumption and production, work and life, office and home, as well as the general lack of labor protection and, not uncommonly, tax evasion—have constituted an "advantage of the backwardness" for people, regions, and nations on the periphery. At the heart of "economic miracles" like the "Third Italy" of Yuan's Prato, or the boom of "Taobao Villages" in which Chuan participates, is the model of home-based division of labor.

Labor Shortage and New Entrants

But if home-based work never disappears, that doesn't mean it's a static process, or that the dynamics Chuan and Yuan have encountered in their lives and work will persist. Almost all the women weavers in the handicraft ecommerce villages in Shandong are forty or older, and most of the younger women show contempt for weaving, dismissing it as physically demanding and culturally inferior to digital labor and urban service work. Not all types of home-based labor on the periphery are the same. Some are more desirable than others. Weaving is monotonous and physically arduous; weavers often suffer from chronic back pain and arthritis after a lifetime spent weaving. Handicraft making was also poorly paid. At a piece rate, a skilled female weaver had to work from dawn to dusk seven days a week to earn as much as an average full-time ecommerce customer service girl or supermarket cashier could earn—about $600 USD per month.

This shortage of women weavers already threatens the long-term sustainability of the ecommerce industry. Some village entrepreneurs hope that the rising per-unit price of woven goods would encourage younger women to take up weaving again, especially as they age and find it harder to work in the urban service sector. Others seek solutions in new handicraft styles that require less human weaving labor, or by outsourcing production to less economically developed villages nearby, where labor costs are lower. Ultimately, like many of the challenges Chuan's Taobao county faces in maintaining the competitiveness of its handicraft ecommerce industry, solving the

The dorm office of an urban-to-rural migrant
ecommerce entrepreneur in Shandong Province

weaving labor shortage will require a collective effort. Decades of entrepreneurialism in family-based labor, and the recent rise of ecommerce, has drawn some migrant birds back home—but the growing atomization of village culture and intra-village inequality does not bode well for collective politics.

As China's living standard rose, the labor pool in Prato also started to drain. As a result, Prato's home factories received new guests. Since the 2010s, the number of Chinese immigrants registered in Prato has stagnated. Just as young people in Shandong despised weaving, young Wenzhounese no longer saw garment work in Italy as an attractive option. Many older workers and shop owners either moved to the service sector (such as cafés and bars) or went back to China. "If you can easily make six to seven thousand yuan [about $1,000 USD a month] by delivering food in Wenzhou, why sacrifice so much to make garments in Prato?" Yuan chuckled in 2015.

For many, Covid-19 was the last straw. During the pandemic, lockdowns and the consequent economic downturn pushed many garment workshops out of business. Yuan's company was one of them. She closed her workshop in 2021 and returned to China with her husband. This year, they started a new business in Wenzhou selling "authentic" Italian gelato to a growing number of middle-class consumers.

What awaits Prato's home factories after the Chinese have left? Just as the Chinese workers were looking elsewhere for better opportunities, immigrants from Pakistan and North Africa were filling in the vacancies. A few of them even bought workshops from the Chinese to become self-employed entrepreneurs. Following the Chinese's footsteps, they will accumulate more knowledge, connections, and capital in the next decade or so, and possibly come to dominate the garment industry, thus adding a new chapter in the centuries-long story of home-based work in Prato.

With the pandemic gradually fading in intensity, some white-collar workers in the Global North are returning to their offices while others are entering the brave new world of permanent work-from-home. But as Chuan and Yuan's stories show, there is an alternative history beyond the white-collar sectors in the Global North that reminds us of the manifold inequalities rendered invisible by our uneven global capitalist system. However, theirs are also stories of hope and extraordinary resilience under difficult conditions, stories about social mobility and making sacrifices for loved ones, of exploitation and self-exploitation, and of making do with what one has while fighting for a better life.

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