
The Changing Landscape of Crowdsourcing in China: From Individual Crowdworkers to Crowdfarms

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ABSTRACT

We report of a new crowdsourcing work paradigm that we came across while interviewing crowdworkers in China mid-May 2019 - that of companies that solely focus in undertaking and doing crowdsourcing tasks en masse. In addition, we discuss why such companies emerged recently, and how it affects the crowdsourcing landscape in China. With this work we highlight an important change in the rapidly changing crowdsourcing landscape of China that merits more research in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Crowdsourcing, i.e. the process of outsourcing tasks by organizations or individuals online in the form of an ‘open-call’, has attracted commercial and academic interest all over the world primarily due to the success of Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk), an American-based platform and one of the first to support crowd work. Crowdsourcing is considered as a problem-solving tool [2], an online distributed problem-solving and production model [1, 3, 4], an open collaborative learning paradigm [11, 14], and a new resource for product development [8]. In China, and over the last few years, crowdsourcing has garnered widespread interest. Articles in People’s Daily [13] and China Daily [12] describe crowdsourcing as a new value creation model, which invigorates IT industries using public intelligence. China, being one of the world’s most populous countries and a rapidly growing digital economy today supplies a substantial workforce to crowdsourcing platforms. According to Huo, Zheng and Tu [9] by 2017 there were already 30 million Chinese crowdworkers serving more than 190,000 enterprises and individuals worldwide, generating a total business turnover of CNY 5 billion (approx. \$900M USD).

At the time of writing, ZBJ¹ and Epwk² have established themselves as the most prominent crowdsourcing platforms in China with around 19 million active crowdworkers each. ZBJ and Epwk cover a wide range of crowdsourcing tasks ranging from click-work to logo and product design. Other crowdsourcing platforms in China include TaskCN³ with almost 500 thousand workers and 680⁴ with roughly 8.5 million workers. For the most part, these platforms operate similarly to other crowdsourcing platforms, such as Upwork⁵ and Mturk⁶.

Limited research about the workers of these Chinese platforms has illustrated that they are mainly individuals seeking to earn additional income in their spare time⁷. However, based on our recent investigations, which included long in-depth interviews with 48 experienced Chinese crowdworkers that worked primarily for ZBJ.com, discussions with 5 policy experts, and a detailed analysis of the aforementioned websites, we have identified that, for the most part, this is not the case anymore as the numbers of individual workers are diminishing and are being replaced by companies that undertake and do crowdsourcing tasks en masse. For brevity’s sake and due to the way they seem to operate, we dubbed these companies “crowdfarms”. See Figures 1 and 2 for pictures of typical crowdfarms.

THE EMERGENCE OF CROWDFARMS

Our preliminary investigations have illustrated that the emergence of crowdfarms can be mainly attributed to three reasons:

- **The changing nature of tasks in the Chinese crowdsourcing platforms – from simple to complex.** Most crowdsourcing tasks in these platforms currently tend to be complex and creative (e.g. product design) or technical (e.g. app development) tasks and tend to require

¹<https://www.zbj.com>

²<https://epwk.com>

³<https://www.taskcn.com>

⁴<https://www.680.com>

⁵<https://www.upwork.com/>

⁶<https://www.mturk.com/>

⁷http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-10/30/content_33898676.htm



Figure 1: Typical environment of a relatively large crowdfarm. The photo was provided to us by a crowdworker that has visited crowdfarms in the past.



Figure 2: Typical environment of a small crowd farm. The photo was provided to us by a crowdworker who has visited crowd farms in the past.

⁸A catch all term used by pretty much all types of small companies related to technology – including crowd farms.

⁹<https://www.china-briefing.com/news/minimum-wages-china-2019/>

¹⁰<https://www.zbj.com/about/index> (website in Chinese)

¹¹<http://work.zbj.com/> (website in Chinese)

multiple individuals to work together to tackle them [5, 7]. This was not used to be the case up until relatively recently (e.g. see [10]). This shift, in our opinion is partly natural and partly artificial. It is natural because crowdsourcing is a relatively new way of doing business in China, and as more individuals and companies in China find out about crowdsourcing they tend to want to leverage the crowd in more and more creative ways [10]. It is also artificial because platforms have, for the most part, indirectly stopped supporting simple tasks (e.g. click-work, questionnaires etc.) and, more recently, focused almost solely on complex tasks (e.g. website creation) that require several individuals to complete. For example, one cannot leverage ZBJ to deploy simple click-work or questionnaires. Rather, one must set up a third-party website and link it to ZBJ through a rather complicated process.

- **Favorable government policies.** The Chinese government provides quite a number of benefits as part of the various initiatives they support. For example, the “mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation program” (dazhong chuangye wanzhong chuangxin; (大众创业万众创新)), which is part of the “moderately prosperous society” (xiaokang shehui; (小康社会)) initiative provides not only low taxation but also various subsidies for “Internet companies”⁸, which range from easy access to government services to space and monetary easing. These, in conjunction with the well-educated Chinese workforce [6], the relatively low minimum salaries⁹, and the benefits that one has if working in a registered company (pension, health insurance, etc), create a favorable landscape for creation of crowd farms.
- **Support from the Crowdsourcing platforms.** Aside from favorable government policies, the platform themselves also create fertile ground for the creation of crowdsourcing companies. ZBJ, for example, is directly supporting crowd farms by promoting themselves as an “incubator” for crowd farms¹⁰, and by giving office space to crowd farms that work in the ZBJ platform for as little as 888 RMB per month per person (approx. \$130 USD per month; see <http://work.zbj.com>) and are currently in the process of building 26 of what they call “crowdsourcing factories” in 26 major cities in China. These “factories” aim to host crowd farms that will work for the ZBJ platform¹¹.

THE EFFECTS OF CROWDFARMS IN CROWDSOURCING IN CHINA

The effects of this new crowdsourcing paradigm are still to be seen, but so far it has had a significant impact on crowdsourcing in China. Based on the discussions with the 49 crowdworkers we have identified the following:

- **Individual crowdworkers mentioned that they find it very difficult to find tasks any more in the platforms.** This, according to the individuals we talked to, is happening because crowd farms take tasks en masse and complete them as soon as they are posted, and because,

they feel that the crowdsourcing platforms in China through their decisions and actions (e.g. increased difficulty for requesters to post simple tasks, provision of cheap office space for companies that work for them) support more these companies rather than individual crowdworkers.

- **Downwards pressure on the remuneration of tasks.** The crowdworkers we discussed with mentioned that crowdfarms are undercutting all bids in order to obtain tasks and hence are decreasing the prices across the board “in a race towards the bottom”. If this continues the individual crowdworkers feel that there will be no monetary motivation for them to do tasks and also feel that, for the most part, the crowdsourcing landscape in China will be dominated by crowdfarms.
- **Emergence of a new type of “individual crowdworkers” that work for the crowdfarms rather than the crowdsourcing platforms.** This is because, according to the crowdworkers we interviewed, the crowdfarms take tasks en-masse regardless on whether they can actually perform them or not. This results in crowdfarms either re-posting tasks for individual crowdworkers to accomplish, or in the case of more complex tasks, the crowdfarms re-posts parts that they cannot accomplish rather than the whole task. This creates an environment where the crowdfarms partially control the payouts of tasks in the platform rather than the requesters. Subsequently, to maximize profits, they usually post tasks at a significant lower payout than originally the requester intended.

That being said, some of the individual crowdworkers we talked to, mentioned that this new crowdsourcing paradigm also has positive effects. The main positive effect that almost all workers mentioned is that crowdfarms employ individuals who would otherwise be jobless. In addition, since crowdfarms are registered companies, they provide workers with benefits that they wouldn’t otherwise have, such as a minimum wage, health insurance, paid holidays and pension. Having mentioned this, it is worth pointing out that workers were overall quite negative towards the emergence of crowdfarms and its effects.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper we reported initial findings on a new crowdworking paradigm we came across while were interviewing crowdworkers in China in mid-May 2019. This paper does not intend to provide a complete picture of the changing landscape of crowdsourcing in China. Rather, it aims to initiate further discussions and research on the topic. Further investigations are suggested to focus on: how crowdfarms operate (structure, practices, workflows, etc), work practices and experience of crowdfarm workers in comparison to individual crowdworkers, and how their operations affect the individual crowdworkers, the crowdsourcing platforms, and the overall landscape of the platform economy of China.

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