

Approaching the Chongqing Bangbang Group

-- Taking T Street as an Example

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Abstract: At a time of rapid social and economic transformation, the Bangbang, a grassroots group of people who rely on a bamboo stick and two nylon ropes to make a living in Chongqing, are easily pushed to the margins of the society, and the occupation of bangbang has gradually become a marginalized occupation. Using participatory observation and face-to-face interviews as research methods, this paper goes into the low-level flexible employment group of Bangbang to understand their occupational operation, relationship network and living conditions, so as to show the real life and mood of Bangbang, and to look at the changes in their occupational situation from their standpoint.

Keywords: Social Adaptation; Low-level Flexible Employment; Boundaries.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on an occupational group that emerged under the dual urban-rural structure in Chongqing: the Bangbang group. They are Chongqing's human porters, named for waiting for business on the street with a bamboo stick tied with two nylon ropes as a carrying tool. However, Chongqing has undergone tremendous changes today. The continuous improvement of roads and convenient transportation has made the bumpy roads no longer a big problem. Bangbang has gradually been replaced by the modern transportation, and the era of Bangbang has passed. This article will attempt to explore the professional characteristics of the Bangbang group, how their social network is constructed, and how they adapt themselves in the process of social transformation.

Regarding the study of Chongqing Bangbang group, Qin Jie focused on the theme of Bangbang's rurality in urban integration, examining the impact of Bangbang's rurality on their urban integration from the perspective of urban perception, analyzing the continuation of rurality in urban integration, and starting with "perception" and "endurance", investigating Bangbang's attitude towards exclusion and injustice in urban life, analyzing their instrumental and strategic endurance [1]. Xia Jin conducted empirical research on Bangbang's labor life and living conditions[2]. Huang Ying and Zhang Dayong reviewed Bangbang's urban survival experience from the turn of the century to the beginning of this century, presenting the survival trajectory and subjective practical ability of the Bangbang group[3]. Ran Qiong used structured interviews and social support theory to analyze the specific reasons for the lack of social support for Bangbang group[4]. Yan Xinxin started with the bottom group, explored how Bangbang struggled to live in a unfamiliar city, interpreted the subjectivity and dignity of Bangbang[5].

This study was conducted in the T Street area of Beibei District, Chongqing City. Through one month of participatory observation and face-to-face case interviews, combined with relevant literature, this article was written.

2. Bangbang: Low-level and Flexible Employment Group

2.1. On-the-spot Payment

Bangbang is a kind of informal group where everyone is a free and independent individual. There are no clear norms to stipulate the relationship and interaction between them, and there is no specific regulation to institutionalize their work. Bangbang group doesn't have a fixed price according to the weight of goods. They price the goods based on their experience. They have a flexible price range in their minds, and then negotiate with customers. Once the negotiation is successful, they can get paid immediately after finishing the job.

There is room for negotiation on the price of moving goods. It is not difficult to find that this is actually a continuation of the rural nature of porters in city life. Most of the Bangbang in Chongqing come from surrounding rural areas. Before entering the city to become porters, they mostly relied on farming for a living. After harvesting their crops, they took them to the market to sell. Unlike supermarkets in the city where prices are clearly marked, there is no fixed price for the crops. Farmers estimate prices based on their experience and overall pricing of the market, leaving room for fluctuation. Therefore, the model of Bangbang getting paid in cash for moving goods is similar to farmers selling their crops for cash. On the one hand, this model is more aligned with the psychological and economic patterns of people who originally migrated from rural areas to cities to work. When they first arrived in the city, Bangbang adopted the continuation of their rural nature as a strategy to adapt to society. This freedom and unregulated rural nature became a psychological and behavioral buffer zone for the Bangbang in the city, helping them gradually adapt to the urban society. On the other hand, the practice of getting paid in cash reflects, to some extent, the farmers' principles of safety first and risk aversion, which also indicates the continuation of rural ideology after these Bangbang migrated to the cities. As pointed out by Scott, the principle of safety first is a logical conclusion drawn from the ecological dependence in farmers' lives, emphasizing that survival security takes priority over a

high average income. For those living on the edge of survival, insecure poverty is more painful than mere poverty[6]. Under the principle of safety first, farmers follow another principle of risk aversion, where farmers would rather reduce the possibility of disasters than try to maximize average profits. In the unstable living environment when they first arrived in the city, working as a porter aligned more with their conservative mindset of risk aversion. The on-the-spot payment from this non-intellectual labor became a better choice for the Bangbang at that time, compared to other low-level and flexible occupations.

2.2. Autonomy of Working Hours

In terms of working hours, the Bangbang group fully demonstrates their autonomy and flexibility. Uncle Zhang (a 58-year-old male from Jiangjin, Chongqing) goes out regardless of the weather. If it rains, he shelters under the entrance of the bank on T Street. "I wait for business here every day. I get up at 7 A.M and leave at 8 A.M. I go back for lunch at noon, return in the afternoon, and then go back home to cook dinner at around 6 o'clock. I stay home and watch TV in the evening," he said. Uncle Qin (a 44-year-old male from Shapin, Chongqing) also shares similar experiences. "I come every day, even when it rains. I can get up whenever I want. No one will judge or control me." Whether their waiting time on the street is fixed due to their daily habits or flexible as they wish, it is entirely their own choice, unrestricted by any rules. As mentioned earlier, Bangbang group dislikes of being controlled is somewhat related to their rural mindset influenced by the self-sufficient peasant economy. They choose to retain their rural characteristics as a strategy to adapt to the city life. In organized environments like construction sites or companies, everyone plays a specific role, working together in a fast-paced and standardized system. However, the rural community operates based on self-sufficient and neighborly assistance within a familiar social context. As independent workers, Bangbang can adjust their work pace, providing a psychological buffer to adapt to the rhythm of city life.

2.3. Flexibility in Career Transition

Additionally, because the occupation of Bangbang is a kind of casual work, there is also great flexibility in transitioning to other careers. The bamboo stick is a symbol of identity. As long as someone is seen holding a bamboo stick tied with a nylon rope on the street, people naturally regard them as Bangbang. Therefore, as long as one has the strength and is willing to do it, they can wait for business on the street as Bangbang. Correspondingly, exiting this informal organization is also highly autonomous. If one no longer wants to do this job, they can simply quit. "If you want to quit halfway, you can. No one will stop you. It's very free." This indicates that the threshold for becoming Bangbang is very low, with no diploma requirements, which is very attractive to low-diploma or non-diploma farmers who want to settle in the city. Entering and exiting the career depends entirely on personal willingness, and the same applies to whether it is compatible with other career. Uncle Chen (a 54-year-old male) is from Xianglong, Hechuan. When asked if he had farmland in his hometown, he said, "I don't farm anymore. Farming that little land doesn't earn much money. Less people lives in my hometown now, and I rarely go back. " Uncle Liu (a 68-year-old male) has farmland in Dashi, Hechuan, and he goes back to help his wife plant rice during the busy farming season. "I

go back when I have time, and I stay for a few more days if I want to. It doesn't matter." he freely coordinates his time and switches between being Bangbang and a farmer. With low educational backgrounds, they can only engage in low-level and flexible careers like cargo handling or agricultural planting. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the deep-rooted farmer mindset of Bangbang is also an important reason. They are unwilling to take risks and try unknown and unfamiliar professional fields. The instability of Bangbang income and the marginalization of the Bangbang career are merely unstable factors in their safe domain.

2.4. Career Adjustments in the Face of Urban Modernization

In the process of urbanization and modernization, the Bangbang group has made corresponding adaptations in their career. Firstly, there is another way of receiving cash on the spot. Uncle Qin said, "Nowadays, WeChat and Alipay are both acceptable. Any payment method is fine, as long as the money can be received and there is no credit." It can be seen that with the development and popularity of third-party payment methods, transaction methods have also diversified. Additionally, apart from waiting for business on the street, there are also situations where people are at home, and business calls come in. Uncle Chen told me, "After finishing a job, I leave my phone number with the customers, and they can call me next time when they need help." Customers who regularly require manual labor for transportation usually exchange phone numbers with the Bangbang after hiring them on the street, making it easier to contact them when needed. Therefore, some customers met by chance on the street may become long-term potential customers.

Secondly, the development and improvement of roads and modern transportation have brought a certain degree of crisis to the Bangbang. Road innovations have solved most of the problems of gradient and long distances. However, on the other hand, it also provides a more modern form of work for the Bangbang. Uncle Chen told me, "If it's far away, we take a bus there and unload the goods." In this case, the Bangbang is no longer limited to small-scale cargo transportation in the traditional sense, but becomes a porter between regions using transportation. This shows that with the progress and development of the transportation system, it does affect the Bangbang's business on the one hand, but on the other hand, the Bangbang is no longer purely reliant on manual labor during the process. They can also rely on increasingly convenient and developed transportation when necessary.

It's not hard to find some characteristics inherent in the Bangbang career, such as receiving payment on the spot, the fluctuation of cargo prices, autonomy in working hours, and rarely venturing into other careers. These are all manifestations of the "continuation of rural characteristics in urban integration" mentioned by Qin Jie. The Bangbang continues to embody their rural roots in the process of adapting to the city, which is further reflected in their career.

3. Scope of Activities and Internal Interactions

3.1. Regionality of Activity Scope

The workplace of Bangbang has its particularity. Whether it's long-term or short-term, there is no fixed and unique location, but can only be divided by regions, mostly in central business districts, logistics hubs, stations, universities, and

other areas with large pedestrian and logistics volumes. Generally speaking, Bangbang will be fixed in one region for a long time[7]. When I asked Uncle Li (a 52-year-old male from Fengdu, Chongqing) why he didn't go to other places to wait for business, he replied, "My home is nearby, just ten minutes away. Why should I go elsewhere?"

Based on the geographical boundaries between regions and the convenient range of activities of the Bangbang, the Bangbang group is divided into several regions. Besides their resident regions, Bangbang can also go to other regions to wait for business. This is not like the local organizations. Uncle Li told me, "I have also gone to W Street. No one complained, but I rarely go there. I live close to T Street and have got used to it." It can be seen that although the Bangbangs' activity areas are divided according to their living areas, their resident activity areas are not the only permanent activity scope. They can choose to go to other areas, and no one can restrict them. However, considering the proximity between their residence and job locations, as well as personal psychological habits, they mostly work in areas close to their residences for a long time. It can be seen that Bangbang group has no clear organization, and everyone is a free and independent individual. However, there is much more interaction and communication between them in the same area, and they also have a stronger sense of identity.

3.2. Introduction by Fellow-Townsmen and Psychological Identity

Uncle Chen said, "I followed our local villagers here. I'm not educated, so I just came here to do manual labor. My good friends are all locals from Hechuan, and we have been together for twenty or thirty years." During my participation in the observation, Uncle Chen always chats or sits with another uncle. I asked where that uncle was from, and he said he was also from Xianglong, Hechuan. Fellow-townsmen play an important role in promoting Bangbang's entry into the city, and they occupy a central position in Bangbang's social network. In the same area, they generally have more frequent and intimate contact and interaction with their townsmen.

3.3. Interaction Modes

The leisure life of Bangbang is monotonous and free. They sit under the bank entrance to avoid the rain, staring blankly, playing with their phones, or occasionally chatting with friends nearby. They excitedly gesture and chat with friends while sitting on the roadside. Standing beside flowerpots, they chat with friends while leaning on wooden sticks. They also gather to play cards, some squatting, some sitting, attracting passersby to watch. When alone, they often sit in a cozy corner of the street, lost in thought and resting.

Next, we need to explore whether there is a competitive state among Bangbang group. In the past, there was a phenomenon of competition among Bangbang for business. But this state should be viewed in the context of the prosperous porter industry, high demand for manual labor, and generally younger porters. Nowadays, the Bangbang career is marginalized, transportation is more convenient, and the average age of porters is higher, presenting a different picture. I asked Uncle Yang (a 49-year-old male from Shapin, Chongqing), "Do you usually do business with friends?" He replied, "We each do our own thing. Customers can ask whoever they want to do it together." That is, although they gather in the same area during their free time, chatting closely or playing cards for entertainment, when business comes, they

work independently.

Finally, let's talk about how Bangbang group stays connected during their personal free time. "I have WeChat with a few close friends, and we also have a WeChat group." When they don't meet in person, they use WeChat to send messages, sharing their daily lives and feelings. They are the primary listeners and communicators when facing the pressures brought by social changes. In their years as Bangbang, the relationship building and interaction patterns with their compatriots or friends have formed a spiritual support.

4. Lack of Social Support

The income of Bangbang is inherently unstable, and in recent years, the environment has become increasingly challenging for them. Additionally, their children generally provide minimal support for their livelihood, and there are even instances where the Bangbang need to financially support their children. These factors collectively contribute to a certain level of anxiety in their lives.

Uncle Wang (a 54-year-old male from Fengdu, Chongqing) mentioned that before the pandemic, he could earn around 5,000 to 6,000 yuan per month, but during the pandemic, his income dropped to only 2,000 to 3,000 yuan per month. His eldest son runs a wholesale business in Jiangjin and is usually busy with purchasing, rarely visiting him. In recent years, Uncle Wang has had to go to Jiangjin to spend the holidays with them. With two children and various loans to repay, his eldest son generally doesn't send Uncle Wang any living expenses; instead, Uncle Wang occasionally helps them financially. His younger son, who recently graduated from vocational school, hasn't yet established himself in society and is unable to provide support to Uncle Wang.

Moreover, although it was previously mentioned that fellow-townsmen occupy an important position in the social network of Bangbang, with more intimate and frequent interactions among them, when faced with real-life difficulties, they tend to not seek help from anyone. This is primarily because everyone is struggling in life. "Even those who appear to be wealthy in the village and claim to have earned a lot of money outside are, in fact, still poor."

Evidently, the younger generation within families provides limited material support to Bangbang, and there are even cases where the Bangbang need to earn money to support their families. Given the difficult living environment and the Bangbang's dignified and resilient character, they tend not to seek help or comfort from others even when facing hardships. Naturally, the emotional support they receive is scarce. Under these circumstances, it is imperative for the government, communities, and society to provide both material and emotional support to this low-income and unstable income group.

5. Conclusion

The flexibility inherent in the career of Bangbang is essentially the "continuation of rural characteristics in urban integration" mentioned by Qin Jie. It plays the role of a psychological buffer zone in the process of Bangbang's social adaptation, and provides a better opportunity for Bangbang's employment transformation. However, Bangbang cannot fully utilize this advantage due to their low cultural level and limited information channels. Meanwhile, Bangbang group has made some adjustments to the operational aspects of their

occupation, combining the traditional aspects of Bangbang occupation with the modernity of social transformation. Finally, “endurance” is not only Bangbang's coping strategy to deal with the conflict between urban and rural dual structure, but also their attitude and approach when facing difficulties in life, which makes it difficult for them to voice their hardships to society. Nowadays, Bangbang group is generally older, and their income is facing more instability. The material and spiritual support provided by society to them needs to be strengthened and implemented. We should pay more attention to Bangbang group's living conditions and help them adapt to the process of urbanization, so that they are not further marginalized by the rapid social and economic transformation.

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