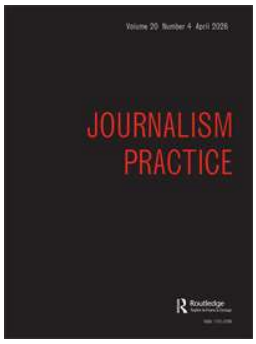

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Leaving the Beat? Chinese Journalists, Precarity, and the Dilemmas of Staying or Moving On

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 19 Chinese journalists working in a range of employment types—including permanent positions (*bianzhi*), short- and long-term contracts, internships and freelance work—this study explores how precarious working conditions are perceived and navigated within China's hybrid media system. It explores (perceived) precarity as a multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by factors such as employment arrangements, salary instability and power dynamics in the workplace. The findings reveal that employees with *bianzhi* and those on long-term contracts generally feel more secure, but a majority of journalists experience varying degrees of precarity. This precarity is exacerbated by wage volatility and workplace hierarchies. For freelance journalists, perceived precarity is compounded by a lack of institutional support and reliable income. The article argues that precarity is not only an economic experience but also an emotional and cultural one, which plays a significant role in journalists' career decisions, particularly regarding whether to stay in the profession or leave it for an industry that offers greater security. By highlighting journalists' perceptions and understanding of precarity in a non-Western media context, this study contributes to broader debates on labour precarity, journalistic professionalism, and media resilience under political and economic pressure.

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Chinese journalists; career trajectories; China; perceived precarity; precarity; precarious work; workplace hierarchies

Introduction

Precarious employment arrangements, declining income security, and heightened performance pressures have increasingly come to define journalistic labour across diverse national contexts. These issues have intensified precarity within journalism, not only at the level of individual careers but also with regard to the long-term sustainability of the profession itself (Radcliffe 2021). At the same time, the expansion of digital platforms and mobile technologies has reshaped journalistic labour, increasing workloads and emotional demands while simultaneously reducing material returns (Li and Deuze 2025).

In contrast to liberal market systems, China's model of media governance, in which state control is intertwined with market forces, creates a distinctive environment in

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which journalists must navigate the tension between political conformity and commercial performance (Chen 2025a, 2025b). At the same time, Chinese journalists' employment arrangements vary widely, from coveted permanent positions—similar to civil service jobs and referred to by the same term, *bianzhi*— to temporary contracts, internships, and freelance work. Each of these arrangements has distinct implications in terms of salary, benefits, working environment and professional autonomy. These dynamics position China as a key context not only for defining journalistic precarity as a labour condition, but also for exploring how journalists make a living in an environment subject to both political (and structural) restrictions and their more personal economic working conditions.

Existing research has recognised that structural restrictions are seen as a decisive condition for journalism in China (e.g., Chen 2025c). However, little attention has been paid to how journalists simultaneously perceive and cope with these structural conditions and their more personal economic working conditions to make a living, and how these perceptions and experiences influence their career decisions and the sustainability of journalism in China. This study aims to address this oversight by answering the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** How do Chinese journalists in different working environments (e.g., party media outlets, commercial media outlets, internships, freelance platforms) perceive and experience precarity?
>
> **RQ2:** How does their perceived precarity affect their career decisions?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 19 journalists representing a range of different working conditions, this article shows that Chinese journalists' sense of their own precarity is determined not only by contract status or income, but also by workplace power dynamics, access to benefits, and the broader political, economic, and cultural context. By highlighting journalists' perceptions and lived experiences, this study offers a highly contextualised empirical understanding of labour precarity in an authoritarian media environment and indicates new directions for further research on journalistic professionalism and the wider sustainability of the media industry. In the context of the large-scale salary cuts and job losses experienced by journalists since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting pressure on their mental health and professional practice, such research is urgently needed (Radcliffe 2021). By doing so, we can enrich theoretical and practical understandings of labour precarity beyond Western-centric frameworks.

Defining Precarity and the Various Factors that Shape It

To date, there is no universally accepted definition of "precarity" in the academic literature, which can be attributed to two main factors. First, precarity encompasses both the objective conditions of work and the subjective experiences of workers, forming a multidimensional concept that resists simple classification (Rick and Hanitzsch 2024). Second, scholarly interpretations of precarity are often context-specific, varying across different social and cultural settings (e.g., Bhargav and Downey 2024). Salamon (2016, 2024) demonstrates that precarity should not be merely understood as an employment situation, but rather as a broader struggle for agency and other due rights in a constantly changing labour market.

With regard to objective precarity, Rick (2025) identifies three key indicators for assessing journalists' working conditions: after-tax income, employment status (including the nature and voluntariness of the employment relationship), and access to employer-provided social security. Similarly, Kreshpaj et al. (2020) conceptualise precarious employment through five objective dimensions: (1) job insecurity, primarily linked to temporary contracts; (2) insufficient income; (3) lack of rights and protections, such as forced labour or absence of social security; (4) adverse working conditions, including excessive demands; and (5) negative health and social outcomes, where work adversely affects physical or mental well-being. While these indicators are crucial for identifying the structural and material aspects of precarious work, they alone cannot determine how individuals perceive precarity. Workers retain agency in interpreting, negotiating, and responding to these situations, which is also influenced by their personal circumstances and expectations of stability, and cannot be inferred solely from political control, structural constraints or economic insecurity.

In contrast, subjective precarity refers to the emotional and psychological responses individuals have to their working conditions, primarily framed in terms of perceived security or insecurity, and further shaped by personal needs for stability (Rick and Hanitzsch 2024). For instance, a freelance journalist without major financial burdens such as a mortgage or car loan may feel more secure than a full-time journalist who faces significant debt. In such cases, perceived precarity refers to journalists' feelings, experiences, and interpretations of precarious work environments (e.g., Araújo 2025; Rick and Hanitzsch 2024). It encompasses not only feelings of fear, vulnerability, insecurity, anxiety and discontent. In addition, it also includes journalists' understanding and assessment of their structural constraints, risks and diminishing sense of professional belonging. This emphasis on individualised risks such as fear and insecurity, along with people's perception and coping abilities, resonates with Beck's (1992) concept of "risk society", where the responsibility for addressing structural precarity increasingly shifts to individuals. This requires individuals to actively cope with structural precarity, rather than simply accepting it as a fixed condition that must be endured. The contemporary digital economy relies heavily on a large amount of unpaid, low-paid, and often voluntary labour, which is also conceptualised as "free labour" (Terranova 2012). This dynamic, where professional ideals and practices of self-exploitation coexist with precarious employment conditions, further complicates how journalists experience, interpret, and rationalise precarity (e.g., Meyers and Davidson 2014).

Global Perspectives on Journalistic Precarity

Precarity has also become a central concept in scholarly analyses of contemporary journalism (Matthews and Onyemaobi 2024). Across a variety of national contexts, researchers have documented journalists' experiences and perceptions of professional precarity, pointing to the often intersecting impacts of factors such as contract type, institutional culture, gender, and the wider political context. For instance, in the European context, Araújo (2025) found that most Portuguese journalists worry about the precarity of their employment, primarily due to low income, limited opportunities for career development, and a lack of basic job security. Springer and Rick's (2025) German study, meanwhile, indicates the existence of different perceptions of precarity based largely on employment

type, exacerbated by financial difficulties in the case of freelancers and by excessive workloads in the case of permanent employees. Journalists in Greece, Spain and Cyprus perceive personal career precarity as closely linked to national political and economic crises (Papadopoulou, Angelou, and Katsaounidou 2024). The emotional and financial toll of professional precarity is compounded for these journalists by limited press freedom, as well as frequent harassment, threats and even violence at the hands of police and politicians (Papadopoulou, Angelou, and Katsaounidou 2024). These findings echo the emphasis of Hardt and Brennen (1995) on situating journalists' work and life experiences in broader structural and political conditions.

Notably, most existing research on journalistic precarity has focused on conditions in the Global North. In contrast, the limited body of literature concerning the Global South underscores the importance of cultural and institutional factors in shaping journalists' experiences of precarious employment. For instance, Chen (2025c) has noted that the absence of legal recognition becomes a key contributor to career precarity for Chinese freelance journalists. Their journalistic activities are frequently deemed non-compliant (Guo and Fang 2022), exposing them to considerable political risk (Chen 2025c). In India, entrenched caste discrimination deprives low-caste stringers of job security, autonomy, and access to essential resources; as a result, they are often forced to engage in various paid, sometimes unrelated jobs in order to build connections with officials and accrue social capital—rendering them among the most precarious of freelance journalists (Bhargav and Downey 2024).

While journalism plays a vital role in shaping public discourse and promoting social justice, the extent to which it can fulfil this role is closely tied to the working conditions and power structures of the profession itself (Cohen 2015). Deuze (2007) advances a more complex and fluid understanding of media workers' increasingly precarious lives, arguing that this precarity extends beyond employment to include housing insecurity, debt burden, and inability to plan for the future. It must also be acknowledged that journalists' work experiences have been increasingly fragmented, destabilised, and networked (Deuze and Witschge 2020). In this context, journalists' professional identities and career trajectories are continuously renegotiated. This study thus seeks to contribute to the Global South research on journalistic precarity by exploring how Chinese journalists experience, perceive, and navigate precarity within their specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

Journalism in China: Employment Types and Their Role in Shaping Precarity

It has been argued that more attention should be paid to specific geographic and political contexts in studies of media practitioners' perceptions, as conditions vary greatly from one country to the next (Papadopoulou, Angelou, and Katsaounidou 2024). Even within countries, regional or city-level economic and cultural differences may influence journalists' experiences and interpretations of precarity (e.g., Gollmitzer 2024; Springer and Rick 2025). It is therefore important to frame any analysis of how precarity is constructed, experienced, and negotiated in terms of the relevant geographical and other contexts (Papadopoulou, Angelou, and Katsaounidou 2024).

Indeed, the employment structure of journalists in China is notably more complex and institutionally stratified than in many countries in the Global North. Specifically, journalists

working for Chinese TV and radio stations are typically employed in one of five main ways (Jiemian News 2018):

(1) as permanent employees in positions underwritten by the state, known as *bianzhi* (编制) or *tizhi nei* (体制内) as its employment type;
(2) as direct employees of the media organisation, often referred to as *taipin* (台聘);
(3) as agency workers, known as *qipin* (企聘);
(4) as project-based temporary workers, sometimes called *waixie* (外协); or
(5) as interns without formal employment contracts.

These categories of employment differ significantly in terms of job security, benefits, institutional support, and professional identity. For instance, permanent employees of news organisations enjoy benefits within the Chinese state system, usually with regard to household registration (*hukou*) and social welfare (MBAChina 2014). They are employed by the state, receive state wages, and enjoy the benefits of state civil servants (Wang 2021). Rigorous recruitment procedures apply to these positions, meaning that only a very small number of journalists fall into this category. *Taipin* journalists usually sign employment contracts directly with news outlets, and generally enjoy access to the "five insurances and one fund" system, receiving welfare benefits that are broadly the same as those of permanent employees (Sohu 2018). Sometimes, news outlets also rely on labour agencies to recruit temporary employees who, in most cases, can only access basic protections such as the "five insurances and one fund" system but are otherwise denied the benefits associated with the two forms of employment outlined above (Sohu 2018). Interns, in contrast, do not usually have employment or labour contracts, instead signing internship agreements (NetEase 2022). These generally outline terms such as the duration of the internship, the nature of the role, and the intern's salary (if any). Interns are usually paid less than other types of employees and may not receive even basic benefits (The Paper 2023). However, hiring interns is a common practice in news organisations, with positions often filled by university students seeking industry experience.

In addition to television and radio stations that adopt the above five employment methods, other news organisations, such as newspapers and news magazines, mainly sign fixed-term or open-ended employment contracts with journalists in accordance with the provisions of the Labour Law of the People's Republic of China (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China 2012). This means that workers' rights to wages, social insurance, and rest and vacation should be protected by law. Among these workers, those with fixed term contracts face a higher risk of dismissal than those with open-ended contracts (China News 2025).

Research indicates that precarity in China is associated with a range of issues. These issues contain gender inequality, low wages, hierarchical work structure, and inadequate supervision, protections and benefits (e.g., Chen 2025c; Qi and Li 2020). These are analyses from the material level, or what might be called objective precarity. This can lead to unnecessary stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety among employees (Springer and Rick 2025), which can in turn produce greater harm, such as a reduced sense of belonging and loyalty to the organisation. What remains to be fully explored, however, are the ways in which different employment arrangements interact with these factors to shape

journalists' perceptions of precarity. These perceptions may, in turn, influence reporting practices and ultimately affect the sustainability of journalism's service to the public interest.

Methods

Participant Recruitment

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 journalists between 9 November 2024 and 19 January 2025. Participants were recruited through our personal networks, snowball sampling, and posts on social media. Two key recruitment criteria were established to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample, namely: (1) participants should be Chinese journalists with a minimum of one year's experience in the industry; and (2) a variety of employment types should be represented, including short-term contracts, permanent positions, internships and freelance work. Recruitment resulted in a diverse group of participants in terms of gender, age, experience, organisation type, employment type, and location. (See Table 1 for detailed participant information.) Compared to most studies that focus on a specific group of journalists (such as freelance journalists or those working in commercial media), this study captures a broader spectrum of experiences across employment types, geographic regions, and media sectors, offering particularly valuable insights. Specifically, 13 female and six male journalists were recruited, ranging in age from 24 to 32 years and in length of industry experience from one year and three months to 11 years. Four participants fall into the *bianzhi* category, meaning they cannot be dismissed from their posts, while nine hold short-term contracts (i.e., *qipin* and fixed-term contracts), subject to renewal or termination every one to three years. In addition, three participants are journalism interns,

Table 1. Participant details.

ID/ Pseudonym	Age	Experience (years)	Gender	Type of organisation	Type of employment	Location
Qin	29	5	Female	Party newspaper	Permanent position (*bianzhi)*	Beijing
Shuai	30	5	Male	Party news outlet	*Bianzhi*	Beijing
Lei	31	5	Female	Official TV Station	Short-term contract employment (*qipin*)	Beijing
Zhu	27	5	Female	Party newspaper	Fixed-term contract	Weifang
Sen	25	1.5	Male	Party news outlet	Fixed-term contract	Shanghai
Yue	29	7	Female	Party news centre	Long-term contract employment (*taipin*)	Weifang
Xin	26	2	Female	Local TV station	Internship	Dongguan
Ze	32	6	Male	Media company	Fixed-term contract	Beijing
Yu	24	4	Female	Party newspaper	Fixed-term contract	Weifang
Fan	32	11	Male	Party news outlet	Fixed-term contract	Weifang
Mang	29	5	Female	Commercial news outlet	Fixed-term contract	Beijing
Li	25	1.5	Female	Party news outlet	*Bianzhi*	Beijing
Xiao	27	4	Female	Party newspaper	*Bianzhi*	Beijing
Ye	26	1.5	Female	Party newspaper	Internship	Shanghai
Tian	30	2	Female	New media platform	Freelance	Beijing
Mei	26	1.25	Female	Party news website	Internship	Shanghai
Gao	24	1.5	Male	Local radio station	Fixed-term contract	Beijing
Jun	31	8.5	Male	Local TV station	*Taipin*	Taiyuan
Le	28	4	Female	Party newspaper	Fixed-term contract	Weifang

and one is a freelancer. 16 participants work for party media organisations, including television and radio stations, while the remaining three work for commercial media organisations or new media platforms. The slightly uneven gender distribution among participants reflects a broader trend in contemporary Chinese journalism, where female journalists constitute a larger proportion of journalists aged 26–35 and under 25 (Lou et al. 2023).

The different cities in which the participants work—Beijing, Shanghai, Dongguan, Taiyuan and Weifang—represent different economic landscapes. An analysis of these cities' GDP reveals relatively robust economic performance in Shanghai, Beijing and Dongguan, while economic indicators for Weifang and Taiyuan are comparatively weak (Sina Finance 2025). This is reflected in the local housing markets, with high housing costs in Beijing, Shanghai and Dongguan compared to relatively affordable prices in Taiyuan and Weifang (Anjuke 2024). Indeed, the interview data show that local economic conditions and housing costs are also important factors in journalists' perceptions of precarity.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted remotely by phone or via the online platform WeChat to accommodate the geographic spread represented by the participants. Interviews lasted between 1 and 3.5 h, resulting in a total of approximately 32 h of recorded data. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, with transcripts later translated into English by the authors. Culturally specific terms such as *bianzhi* have been retained in *pinyin* form to preserve accuracy and authenticity. Prior to the interview, participants were given digital consent forms and information sheets and signed declarations of informed consent were obtained from all. Around 20 open-ended questions were prepared, focusing on the participants' views on precarity and their own specific work experiences, as the basis for semi-structured interviews. This one-on-one interactive method allows space for participants to provide examples, clarify their statements, elaborate on ideas, and explore issues not explicitly covered in the interview framework (Karatsareas 2022). Semi-structured interviews thus facilitate a more flexible and informative conversation between researchers and participants.

Data Analysis

The data collected via the interview were subjected to thematic analysis. All interview transcripts were read multiple times to allow the researchers to become familiar with the data. An initial coding framework was developed inductively, allowing codes to emerge organically from the data rather than being established a priori (Proudfoot 2023). These codes were then grouped into broader themes relating to journalists' perceptions of precarity, the factors contributing to it, and its impact on career decisions. During the interviews, after participants shared their candid opinions and perspectives, the researchers often encouraged them to provide specific examples or personal experiences to support their views. This approach helps clarify the cultural framework underlying each question (Lamont and Swidler 2014). Accordingly, in the analysis section, the participants' concrete examples and experiences are also incorporated. The analysis revealed that a variety of factors shape Chinese journalists' perceptions of precarity, including employment type, salary, workplace power dynamics, Confucian values, etc.

Findings

Employment Types and Their Role in Shaping Perceived Precarity

Interview data reveal significant differences in journalists' perceptions of precarity based on their employment type. These disparities underscore how employment structures in Chinese journalism shape not only the objective conditions of work but also journalists' perceptions of precarity and professional autonomy. The following accounts illustrate these dynamics in greater depth.

Specifically, journalists in *bianzhi* roles (permanent and state-affiliated) are generally satisfied with this form of employment, primarily due to the protection from risk and additional benefits that it offers. Qin, a female journalist who holds a *bianzhi* position in Beijing, acknowledged the sense of relative security provided by her job: "We are part of the system (*tizhi nei*). … The system offers us more of a guarantee." For Shuai, a male *bianzhi* journalist in Beijing, the perceived value of *bianzhi* employment lies less in journalistic security *per se* than in its broader socio-institutional benefits, particularly the eligibility for a Beijing *hukou* (household registration), allowing him to live and work in Beijing as a recognised resident:

> Our organisation has a policy that only staff with *bianzhi* are eligible for a Beijing *hukou*. I was able to obtain a Beijing *hukou* under this system. The permanent position does offer stability —you cannot be fired. In reality, though, the *hukou* is more valuable than the *bianzhi* position. … The benefits of a Beijing *hukou* are permanent. (Shuai, *bianzhi*)

Shuai's account highlights how the journalists' perceptions of precarity are embedded in broader systems of social stratification. In China, *hukou* is a hereditary household registration system that classifies individuals as urban or rural residents and assigns them to specific locations; individuals can only enjoy rights and benefits within the jurisdiction where they are registered (Vortherms and Liu 2022). The *hukou* system correlates employment status with access to housing, education, and long-term urban settlement, thereby extending the concept of precarity beyond the workplace to family formation and intergenerational mobility. In this respect, journalists' perceptions of precarity are shaped by labour contracts and state-controlled household registration systems.

In contrast, the fixed-term contracts signed by journalists with media companies or news outlets specify the start and end dates of work (usually renewed triennially). Consequently, journalists feel more insecure about their jobs. Although Article 14 of China's Labour Law stipulates that after signing two fixed-term contracts, workers have the right to request to sign an open-ended contract (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China 2012), but in reality, this is not always implemented. Under such arrangements, journalists described heavy workloads, limited bargaining power, and widespread replaceability, which intensified their anxiety and fear. Ze recalled:

> When senior employees say they are feeling stressed and request either time off or a salary increase, the response is often simply, "You can leave". When it happens, the company will simply give their work to new employees. If these new employees also become overwhelmed, they will soon be replaced by another batch of newer employees. (Ze, fixed-term contract)

Of note, the account of Tian illustrates how Chinese freelance journalists perceive precarity, which is shaped by both unstable material conditions and limited institutional

support. Tian, a freelance writer, earns only 700 yuan (roughly 96 United States (U.S.) dollars) for a 1,400-word article, a rate that some news organisations remain unwilling to pay. Thus, this aggravates the uncertainty of her income. Meanwhile, Tian is expected to meet elevated professional demands without receiving editorial guidance or organisational backing. As she explained, "The editors expect me to work like an experienced writer."

More broadly, freelance writing in China entails unstable income and systematic exclusion from organisational support and legal protection (Chen 2025c). Under this background, precarity perceived by freelance journalists is more like a persistent state of vulnerability resulting from weak editorial support, unstable income and insufficient institutional recognition.

Interview analysis suggested that employment type is of vital importance to shape journalists' perceptions of precarity. Journalists who hold *bianzhi* positions are inclined to perceive their work as relatively secure. They draw on structural protections like job security and access to social benefits to sustain a sense of safety and contentment. In contrast, journalists on fixed-term contracts often perceived their work as inherently uncertain. Concerns about contract renewals, heavy workloads and limited access to social benefits continue to result in their insecurity even when they are formally employed.

The strongest sense of precarity emerged in the account of the only freelance journalist of the study. The journalist reported not only material hardship but also emotional strain. Although freelance journalism has been widely considered as emblematic of labour precarity in journalism (e.g., Cohen 2015; Gollmitzer 2024), this case suggests that freelancers in China not only encounter income instability and the absence of employment benefits, but also face additional forms of precarity and vulnerability. In contrast to Global North contexts where freelancers may still rely on labour organisations or legal frameworks for partial protection (e.g., Salamon 2016), Chinese freelance journalists operate in a media environment with weaker regulation and political constraints. These factors exacerbate freelance journalists' perceptions of risk and being abandoned by institutions, which thus amplifies their anxieties in all aspects of their work and daily lives.

Wage Issues: A Key Factor in Shaping the Perception of Precarity

Interview analysis revealed wage volatility as another factor with a direct impact on journalists' perception of their own precarity, which can lead to feelings of anxiety and insecurity. This applies to journalists regardless of employment type. For instance, Yue, a female journalist employed by a party media outlet in Weifang, Shandong Province, expressed her concerns about pay cuts at her workplace in the following terms:

> My current job is reasonably comfortable, but the pay has been decreasing. … It feels unstable, especially since they cut our wages this year. I am worried that the organisation will run into financial difficulties one day and simply lay us off. (Yue, *taipin*)

Yue thus linked precarity to pay cuts, stressing that it was this factor in particular that made her perceive her job as unstable. Although other aspects of the job—a relatively light workload and a lack of rigorous workplace assessments—led her to describe it as "comfortable", she did not perceive these as sufficient to constitute job stability in the context of pay cuts.

Yue's experience of pay cuts is far from unique to her organisation or location. Journalists working in other cities and for other media outlets also mentioned this phenomenon when discussing their perceptions of precarity. For instance, Xin, an intern at a local TV station in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, highlighted widespread pay cuts and other systemic problems facing the industry:

> Over time, some journalists decide to leave because of repeated pay cuts, declining social status, reduced public recognition, and decreasing opportunities for meaningful work. As for me, I have completely given up when it comes to certain expectations. Now I just hope I'll be able to support myself, instead of actually losing money through this career. (Xin, internship)

The testimony of Xin reflects the precarity felt by interns at the bottom of the journalistic food chain. While established journalists may consider leaving the profession due to pay cuts and deteriorating working conditions, interns are more concerned about when or whether they will become regular employees. This long-term uncertainty of transition to regular employment affects interns' perceptions of their current situation and future, which exacerbates their feelings of vulnerability and insecurity in overcoming immediate material difficulties. Faced with the hardship of unpaid work in a struggling industry, journalism interns like Xin, Ye and Mei have significantly lowered their expectations for the future in terms of salary, social status, public recognition, and professional autonomy. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of aspirational or hope labour, where journalism interns accept adverse conditions in exchange for future employment opportunities (Gollmitzer 2021). Nevertheless, Gollmitzer (2021) points out that such aspirations are often accompanied by disillusionment: internships rarely bring about permanent or long-term employment, instead trapping early-career journalists in an ongoing cycle of underemployment and insecurity.

In fact, salary-related challenges affect nearly all categories of Chinese journalists, including those with a *bianzhi* position (e.g., Qin and Shuai). Tenured journalists also reported pay cuts as a major source of dissatisfaction. Qin, a female *bianzhi* journalist in Beijing, said: "[The salary] is highly unstable—this is my main 'pain point'." Despite holding a permanent position, Qin reported significant income uncertainty due to fluctuations in performance-based pay and frequent, unpredictable changes to the evaluation system. Her monthly earnings fluctuates by as much as 5,000–6,000 yuan per month. The remarks of Qin indicate that even a *bianzhi* position cannot guarantee a stable sense of economic security in all aspects of a journalist's job. Substantial monthly wage fluctuations lead to emotional distress and low morale even among these relatively privileged journalists.

Shuai highlighted a key reason for the decline in Chinese journalists' wages, especially in party media: "The country is now advocating a 'belt-tightening' policy, and we have also been affected." This "belt-tightening" is not an official Chinese government policy, but a manifestation of the principle of "living a frugal life" advocated by President Xi Jinping, who has repeatedly stressed that "the Party and the government [must] take the lead in living a frugal life to enable the people to live a good life" (Lan 2022). In response, finance departments across the country have implemented stricter budget controls, and many party and government agencies are paying increasing attention to employee performance evaluations (Ling 2021). In this sense, *bianzhi* journalists' wage

precarity is tied less to individual performance than to organisational alignment with national budget priorities, thereby producing a form of insecurity that differs from market-driven pay volatility in commercial media systems.

In addition to insecurity stemming from pay cuts and income fluctuations, some journalists reported delays in salary payments. Jun, a male journalist working for a TV station in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, recalled a period when the work unit' s official bank account was frozen due to a lawsuit, resulting in three to four months without wages. Earning only 3,000 yuan (approx. 411 US dollars) per month, Jun expressed considerable frustration over the delay. He acknowledged his *taipin* employment was a "semi-iron rice bowl", and remarked that "the organisation will not fire me as long as I do not do anything illegal". However, he also noted that this job security itself is not sufficient to constitute a sense of stability for employees with families to support.

Indeed, journalists' narratives indicate that wage precarity constitutes a critical axis affecting professional precarity across all employment types in Chinese journalism, including those *bianzhi* positions that are traditionally associated with stability. Instead of understanding their vulnerability solely in terms of contractual form, journalists hold that wage volatility proves the weakening of institutional protection and the diminishment of organisational reliability. Therefore, journalists experience and perceive a distinctive variant of precarity that is neither fully market-driven nor purely consistent with a state-controlled employment model.

Workplace Power Dynamics and Their Impact on the Perception of Precarity

The analysis of the interviews shows that workplace power dynamics and hierarchies also shape journalists' perceptions of precarity. Structures that undermine journalists' autonomy and decision-making authority intensify their feelings of insecurity and powerlessness, deepening their overall sense of career precarity. Mei, an intern working at a party media outlet in Shanghai, indicated this dynamic, emphasising the strict hierarchical structure within her organisation:

> I have to show a great deal of respect to my superiors. … Everyone interacts very cautiously here. The leaders also tend to act very superiorly. (Mei, internship)

As an intern with limited work experience and authority, Mei is compelled to accept a tense and hierarchical work environment, showing deference to her superiors in the hope of securing a formal position. She presents this atmosphere as a prominent feature of the party media's organisational culture. Indeed, Mei was not the only interviewee to observe a connection between the pursuit of stability and deference to hierarchical structures among party media employees. Ye, another female journalist working for a party outlet in Shanghai, expressed similar views:

> In official media, your superiors may not expect you to be particularly talented or outstanding, but they certainly demand obedience and alignment with their directives. (Ye, internship)

Mei's and Ye's accounts illustrate how career stability in party media depends more on political conformity and organisational loyalty rather than journalistic competence. This form of hierarchy cannot be equated with common hierarchical relationships in Global North newsrooms. In the context of China, high power distance is culturally normalised

and institutionally reinforced, particularly within party-affiliated media organisations, where deference to authority is closely tied to political discipline and career survival rather than merely organisational efficiency (e.g., Chen 2025c). Hence, journalists perceive that their employment security is contingent upon obedience and political alignment, which heightens their sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. This form of perceived precarity differs from hierarchical relations in most Global North newsrooms, which are typically situated in cultures with lower power distance, where flatter organisational structures and greater employee autonomy are more normative.

A contrasting account was provided by Mang, a female journalist working for a commercial news outlet in Beijing. She expressed satisfaction with her working environment, counting this among the few factors that make her feel her job is stable. She explained:

> Our supervisor is someone who does not have any "official airs" (*guan jiazi*). He usually comes to work in casual clothes and does not try to appear superior. … We are not part of the official bureaucracy. We are not within the system (*tizhi nei*), so we do not act like them. Our dress code is also very casual; you can even wear a vest to work and no one will say anything about it. (Mang, fixed-term contract)

Mang's tone in giving this account was one of pride. She portrayed a relaxing work environment. In such an environment, leaders do not require subordinates to unquestioningly follow orders or abuse their position of superiority, and employees are free to dress whatever they want without fear of reprimand. Such organisational arrangements foster a sense of ease and psychological safety, which reduces the perceived vulnerability of journalists in everyday workplace interactions. Other journalists in commercial outlets also reported flatter hierarchies and more egalitarian interpersonal relations, which thus lowered their perceived precarity despite continuing contractual insecurity.

Previous research on journalism has acknowledged that precarity undermines journalistic autonomy (e.g., Čehovin Zajc and Lukan 2024), and scholars have begun to examine how newsroom hierarchies influence creative and professional autonomy (e.g., Porcu, Hermans, and Broersma 2025). However, relatively limited work has theorised hierarchical power relations as a distinct contributor to (perceived) precarity. Our analysis shows that strict hierarchies and deference to authority—particularly in party media—shape journalists's perceptions of precarity. By comparison, journalists in less hierarchical commercial outlets reported reduced feelings of insecurity even in the absence of stable employment contracts. This is attributable to more egalitarian workplace cultures. These findings suggest that rigid hierarchical power structures constitute a critical driver of perceived precarity in the Chinese media context, as it exacerbates obedience to superiors and restricts professional discourse.

Perceived Precarity and Its Impact on Career Decisions

This study finds that journalists in different types of employment relationships make divergent career decisions in response to perceived precarity, underscoring the intersection of material insecurity, workplace power dynamics, and broader cultural expectations. Some of the journalists interviewed for this study claimed to be reconsidering their career trajectories, contemplating the possibility of changing careers or moving to other media organisations in response to the challenges discussed above. For instance, Le, a female journalist working for a party newspaper in Weifang, Shandong, said:

> I heard that *Dazhong.com* laid off a group of permanent employees a while ago because their salaries are relatively high, while temporary workers' salaries are relatively low, so they laid off a number of permanent employees and replaced them with temporary workers. Our work environment is unstable now, and the salary is not high, and it's relatively high-pressure. (Le, fixed-term contract)

Although Le's own organisation had not implemented layoffs, news of such measures at other media outlets had left her feeling unsettled. She intimated that her career no longer brings her a sense of fulfilment, with low wages, high stress levels, and the constant threat of unemployment creating an insecure and unstable working environment. She even mentioned that she considers those journalists who have the courage to pursue new careers to be "particularly capable people", while those who remain journalists for life are "decadent guys". She used this term because, in her view, remaining in a career that increasingly fails to fulfil either material needs or broader aspirations reflects a lack of concern for career development, income, social status and overall quality of life.

As a result, Le and many of her peers (e.g., Yu, Ze, Gao) began to reconsider their commitment to journalism, with some preparing for the civil service examination and others pursuing more lucrative roles in corporate public relations or related sectors. These alternative career paths are seen as offering either greater financial reward or enhanced job security, with journalism increasingly viewed as unsustainable unless one is willing to forgo career ambitions and long-term stability. As Le explained: "Our current monthly salary is about 6,000 yuan, while public sector positions in these fields can have an annual salary of 300,000–400,000 yuan." Le also notes that journalists' wide networks of contacts represent a great advantage in the PR industry, potentially enabling them to help companies negotiate with the government.

Not all journalists, however, are seeking to change careers or even roles; this mainly includes freelance journalists and those with long-term employment contracts (i.e., *bianzhi* and *taipin*). Tian, the only freelancer in this study, chose to continue freelance writing despite challenges such as vulnerability, income instability, and lack of institutional support. She explained that the decisive factor was the feeling of "mental freedom and autonomy in work and rest" that freelancing affords her. This finding supports Rick and Hanitzsch's (2024) argument that individual journalists may perceive a sense of security even in highly precarious work environments—a perception shaped more by subjective experiences than by objective conditions.

For most long-term contract journalists, job security is a major factor in their decision to remain in their current role. Analysis of the interviews shows that this kind of objective career stability is particularly important to individuals (such as Li, Xiao and Qin) who consider themselves risk-averse, and the sense of security it provides profoundly influences their career planning. As Li explained:

> Although there are certain limitations to this position, it also provides a greater sense of security. Compared to those working in market-oriented media outlets, I am less likely to face sudden unemployment. As someone who is risk-averse, I am unwilling to take major career risks. (Li, *bianzhi*)

It is worth noting that Li's decision was deeply influenced by China's Confucian values and Chinese parents' expectations of job security. For many Chinese parents, only stable and permanent positions—such as those in the civil service—are seen as serious and

respectable career options for their children. In order to prepare for the civil service exam, many young people receive financial support from their parents (Wang, Xu, and Zhang 2023). However, this support often comes with the expectation that, once successful, the individual will not be allowed to give up the security of a stable job, even if this requires suppressing their personal ambitions or personality (Wang, Xu, and Zhang 2023).

Despite this largely positive attitude, however, Li also acknowledged the limitations of her role, particularly with regard to censorship, a point also pointed out by other party media reporters. "Even a slight ambiguity that could potentially lead to public controversy or be perceived as insufficiently positive is enough to trigger redaction," Li noted. Even these clear limitations, however, are not enough to compel Li and other *bianzhi* journalists to risk their current security for the sake of greater autonomy.

This section thus reveals that Chinese journalists'career decisions are shaped not only by employment type, wage issues, and workplace power dynamics, but also by broader cultural norms and individual risk tolerance. Even as the journalistic field becomes increasingly precarious, these cultural expectations and individual risk tolerance may also dissuade individuals from pursuing more autonomous or entrepreneurial paths. In this scenario, journalists' career decisions are not merely rational responses to objective precarity, but subjective negotiations between personal aspirations and cultural obligations.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores Chinese journalists' perceptions of precarity and how these influence their career decisions and, consequently, the sustainability of the profession in China. Based on data collected through interviews with 19 journalists representing a variety of employment arrangements and institutional backgrounds, this study finds that precarity is not merely perceived as a straightforward material condition but a social phenomenon shaped by employment type, income level and stability, and individual risk tolerance. Furthermore, this study expands upon the relevant literature, pointing out that in the Chinese context, journalists' perceptions of precarity are deeply intertwined with (intergenerational) career expectations and Confucian values.

First, regarding employment type, journalists with permanent *bianzhi* positions normally consider themselves more secure. They primarily attribute this perception to the benefits attendant on such roles as household registration and protection from the threat of dismissal. By contrast, journalists who work on fixed-term contracts experience heightened anxiety due to heavy workloads and the refusal of demands for leave and pay. At the same time, freelance journalists and interns perceive even more severe precarity as a result of weak institutional support, unpaid labour, and their marginal position within organisational hierarchies. These phenomena echo findings from other Global South contexts, where precarity is often exacerbated by informality and weak organisational protection (e.g., Bhargav and Downey 2024). While in China, this perceived precarity is even more pronounced due to the weak enforcement of labour laws and the pursuit of stability in Confucian culture.

Second, issues relating to salary have a pervasive effect on journalists' perception of their own precarity. Even for tenured journalists, pay cuts and significant fluctuations associated with unpredictable performance reviews may contribute to a diminished

sense of stability. While wage volatility is a prominent feature of journalistic precarity in the Global North contexts (e.g., Cohen 2019; Deuze and Witschge 2020), this study suggests that in China, economic insecurity is further exacerbated by an opaque evaluation system and a moral framework of obedience and loyalty as professional virtues. As a result, salary precarity is defined not only as an economic concern but also as an indicator of journalists' organisational security and prospects.

Third, power relations in the workplace are another significant factor influencing journalists' perceptions of precarity. Rigid hierarchical structures, which are especially prevalent in party media outlets, foster a cautious and excessively deferential work culture in which obedience is often prioritised over editorial autonomy and even journalistic competence. This finding underscores what distinguishes precarity in journalism from that in many other occupational fields: workplace power relations directly shape not only employment security but also journalists' ability to exercise editorial autonomy and professional judgement, along with the degree to which they perceive precarity. In a hierarchical and authoritarian newsroom, precarity is experienced through dependence on managerial authority, constrained professional voice, and heightened vulnerability to organisational decisions, thereby shaping journalists' sense of professional security and long-term career prospects.

As well as shaping their perceptions of precarity, these structural and cultural factors also influence journalists' career decisions. Some, especially those in permanent positions, prioritise risk avoidance, choosing to remain in their posts instead of seeking greater autonomy elsewhere. Others, especially those working on shorter-term contracts, may consider moving into the private sector or attempting to secure a civil service role in pursuit of higher pay or greater job security. These decisions are not based on rational economic considerations alone; emotional resilience and cultural norms also play a significant role.

It is worth noting that Global North studies often attribute journalistic precarity to problems such as heavy workload, low income, and lack of career development (e.g., Araújo 2025; Springer and Rick 2025). Although Chinese journalists similarly experience insecurity and instability, this convergence of outcomes does not imply structural equivalence. In the context of China, precarity is primarily organised by state-mediated employment hierarchies (Yin and Zheng 2025), institutionalised welfare access (Wang 2021), and selective enforcement of labour protection within politically sensitive sectors (Wang 2016). Against this backdrop, precarity is caused less by contractual flexibility *per se* than by limited enforcement of labour protection and weak regulatory accountability. This restricts journalists' ability to defend labour rights or protest against deteriorating working conditions. This often leads to heightened perceived precarity, including feelings of replaceability, emotional exhaustion, and diminished control over career development. These sentiments were particularly acute when management disregarded labour laws and covertly increased employees' workloads.

By focusing on Chinese journalists' perceived experiences and interpretations of precarity, this study contributes to Global South Scholarship through demonstrating how precarity operates at the intersection of labour insecurity and political governance in a non-Western, authoritarian media environment. The Chinese case demonstrates how the meanings and consequences of precarity are basically reshaped by state power, institutional hierarchy, and the pursuit of stability in Confucian culture. These findings

suggest that journalistic precarity cannot be fully understood through market-based frameworks alone, but requires attention from political, cultural, and emotional dimensions of labour.

As Chinese media continues to evolve under increasing political and economic pressure, it is crucial to understand how journalists perceive, interpret and cope with precarity to assess the sustainability of journalism as both a profession and a public good, which deserves more nuanced, contextualised research. While this study included journalists from diverse cities, employment types, and power structures, the number of freelance journalists in the sample was still limited. Future research could more thoroughly investigate Chinese freelancers' perceptions of precarity and explore comparative cases across the Global South to refine a grounded theory of journalistic labour from a global perspective.

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Siyu Chen:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft; **Ruiming Li:** Conceptualization, Investigation; **Guorui Zhao:** Investigation, Resources, Validation.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

The study did not undergo formal review by an institutional ethics committee as such a committee does not exist at the first/corrresponding author's institution. Nevertheless, this study strictly adheres to the ethical standards commonly accepted in social science research, as practiced at the University of York, UK. The first author also received rigorous ethics training during her doctoral studies at the University of York. All procedures were designed to ensure participants' privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. All participants were informed of the study's aims and procedures, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

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