



EMPLOYMENT INSECURITY AS A DRIVER OF INFORMAL CROSS- BORDER TRADE: A CASE STUDY OF THE CHINA–KAZAKHSTAN BORDER

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ABSTRACT. *This research paper investigates the relationship between employment insecurity and informal cross-border trade (ICBT) at the China–Kazakhstan border. By conducting a survey of individuals involved in ICBT, this study aims to understand the factors that drive individuals to engage in this type of economic activity. The findings suggest that employment insecurity, characterized by factors such as inadequate wages, lack of social security, and precarious employment conditions, is a significant driver of ICBT. Individuals facing employment insecurity often turn to ICBT as a means of supplementing their income and ensuring their livelihoods. This research contributes to the understanding of the complex dynamics of informal trade and its relationship to employment insecurity in the context of the China–Kazakhstan border.*

KEYWORDS: *employment insecurity, informal cross-border trade, informal trade, informal economy, trade.*

INTRODUCTION

The informal economy, encompassing economic activities operating outside formal regulations and lacking legal protections (Godfrey, 2011), constitutes a significant portion of many economies, particularly in developing regions (ILO, 2023). While it provides crucial income and employment opportunities, especially for vulnerable populations, it is often characterized by precarious working conditions, inadequate wages, and limited access to social security benefits (Utzet et al., 2021). This precariousness can have significant social implications, including inequality (Senoret et al., 2022), increased poverty, and further social exclusion (Gallie et al., 2003). In fact, research on informality highlights that informal practices should not be conflated with the shadow economy, as they often constitute adaptive strategies to cope with weak or absent state structures (Polese et al., 2023).

Informal cross-border trade (ICBT), a subset of the informal economy, involves the cross-border exchange of legally produced/acquired goods outside official channels (Kahiya & Kadirov, 2020). While research has explored the impact of trade on both formal and informal employment (Tanaka & Greaney, 2024), there remains a gap in understanding the specific role of employment insecurity in driving individuals towards informal trade, particularly within border regions. Everyday practices of bypassing the state, documented across Eurasian contexts, demonstrate how informality can become embedded as a normalized mode of survival and exchange rather than simply a marginal

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economic activity (Polese, 2023). This is especially relevant in contexts like the China–Kazakhstan border, where bilateral trade has been steadily growing, reaching \$43.8 billion in 2024 (Omarova, 2025). This growth, while indicative of economic dynamism, also presents challenges related to informality and its potential consequences.

This paper investigates the relationship between employment insecurity and ICBT at the China–Kazakhstan border. By examining the experiences and motivations of individuals engaged in ICBT, the objective of this study is to understand the factor of employment insecurity in driving individuals to engage in this type of economic activity. This study contributes to the understanding of the complex dynamics of informal trade and its relationship to employment insecurity in a specific border region context. By shedding light on the factor of employment insecurity that drives individuals towards informal economic activities, this research provides valuable insights for policymakers seeking to promote more inclusive and sustainable development in border regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic activities that operate outside the framework of formal institutions constitute a significant portion of many economies, often referred to as the informal economy (Hart, 1985; ILO, 2025). This sector often serves as a critical source of income, especially in developing countries. However, it is frequently characterized by challenges such as inadequate earnings and precarious working conditions (ILO, 2025).

The informal economy is a global phenomenon. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 2 billion workers, constituting over 60 percent of the global adult labour force, are employed in the informal sector (IMF, 2021). There is considerable regional variation in the size of the informal economy, with Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa having the highest levels while Europe and East Asia have the lowest (IMF, 2021).

Studies have established connections between participation in the informal economy and issues like poverty, inequality, and employment insecurity (Rosser et al., 2000; Sharma & Adhikari, 2020; Tokman, 2007). The informal economy is a major source of livelihood for the marginalized and poor, and income from this sector has a significant impact on household livelihoods (Sharma & Adhikari, 2020). Despite the benefits of the informal economy in reducing poverty, workers in the informal economy are highly vulnerable to a lack of social protection, the absence of contracts, and other issues related to employment insecurity, as well as increased income inequality (Rosser et al., 2000; Tokman, 2007).

The factors motivating informal trade are generally discussed in two categories: push (i.e., "force") and pull (i.e., "opportunity") factors. Push factors compel individuals into informal trade due to unfavourable circumstances, while pull factors represent "opportunities" that attract individuals to engage in informal trade (Kahiya & Kadirov, 2020). Employment insecurity can serve as a push factor driving individuals to engage in informal trade.

Studies found that workers in the informal sector are often more vulnerable to job loss and income insecurity than those in the formal sector (ILO, 2018; Linh, 2024). This can

be attributed to a variety of factors, such as lack of job security and precarious working conditions (Hakansta et al., 2024; Jarosch, 2023). As a result, many people turn to informal trade as a means of supplementing their income or making a living. Studies have shown that informal trade can be a coping mechanism for poverty and inequality (Chadambuka, 2021; Leonard, 2000; Sharma & Adhikari, 2020). In many developing countries, informal trade is an essential way for people to earn a living or to cope with income insecurity (Rosser et al., 2000; Sikder & Sarkar, 2005). This is because they are often excluded from the formal economy or subjected to the intense pressure of employment insecurity, thus motivating them to engage in the informal economy.

The characteristics and trends of ICBT along the China–Kazakhstan border predominantly emerge from economic necessity and employment insecurity faced by local populations. The persistent youth unemployment crisis in China, driven by sluggish economic recovery, structural job mismatches, and intensified competition, has left many young workers struggling to secure stable employment (Yang, 2024). Similarly, in Kazakhstan, young people under 35 constitute about 40% of the workforce, yet many face barriers to employment, including skill mismatches and high rates of informal work (Alshanskaya, 2024). Nearly one-third of Kazakhstan’s working population is engaged in informal employment, often without formal contracts, social guarantees, labour protections, or pensions (Vagit, 2025). ICBT in the China–Kazakhstan border region includes a range of activities, from small-scale smuggling to cross-border market exchanges, driven by limited access to formal employment opportunities (Hung, 2019; Lillis, 2023). In contexts where regulatory enforcement is weak, such as in border areas, individuals often engage in informal trade as a survival strategy (Anderson & de la Rosa, 1991; Kim, 2014). Informal networks flourish, exploiting the porous nature of the border, providing both goods and a livelihood. The precariousness of employment in the formal sectors exacerbates this trend, fostering a reliance on alternative economic practices that circumvent state regulations (IOM, 2023). Consequently, these informal trade dynamics not only reflect local economic adaptations but also illustrate the broader socio-political implications of employment insecurity in shaping cross-border interactions and livelihoods along the China–Kazakhstan border.

While existing literature has explored various aspects of ICBT and its socio-economic implications, there remains a gap in understanding the specific role of employment insecurity in driving individuals towards ICBT, particularly within border regions like the one shared by China and Kazakhstan. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the experiences and motivations of individuals engaged in informal trade at this specific border.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey-based methodology to collect primary data from individuals engaged in informal cross-border trade at the China–Kazakhstan border. The survey captured comprehensive information on participants’ socio-demographic characteristics, employment histories, nature and scope of informal trade activities, motivations for engaging in such trade, and perceptions of employment insecurity. This approach allows for an empirically grounded understanding of how employment

insecurity shapes involvement in informal trade, consistent with the study’s exploratory and inductive orientation.

The sampling method involved purposive sampling, where the researcher initially identified a group of individuals known to be cross-border traders, some of whom were likely engaged in informal trade. The survey was then sent to this group to investigate their involvement in informal trade activities. This approach was deemed appropriate given the specific focus on traders at the border, and it allowed for targeted data collection from individuals who were most relevant to the study. This method, however, differs from the two-stage sampling process, including Adaptive Cluster Sampling (ACS), often employed in studies of informal businesses (Aga et al., 2023). ACS involves dividing a geographical area into grid squares and randomly selecting squares for full enumeration of informal businesses, allowing for a geographically representative sample (World Bank, 2023). This approach was not adopted in this study due to resource constraints and the difficulty in defining a clear geographical boundary for informal trade activities, which often occur across dispersed locations along the border.

Data collection was conducted through an online channel, Microsoft Forms, using a structured questionnaire. Based on the respondents' preferred language, the questionnaire was designed to include Chinese and Kazakh languages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics of Informal Traders

The survey identified 52 participants involved in informal trade at the China–Kazakhstan border from 189 collected surveys. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The survey revealed a diverse group of individuals participating in ICBT. Most participants were in the 25-35 age range, with a slightly higher proportion being male. A surprisingly high proportion held university degrees. This challenges the common perception of informal traders as primarily low-skilled individuals. It suggests that factors beyond education, such as limited formal employment opportunities or a desire for greater income and flexibility, may be driving this phenomenon.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

| Characteristic | Category | Individual | Percentage |
|-----------------|----------------------|------------|------------|
| Age | 18-24 | 12 | 23% |
| | 25-35 | 27 | 52% |
| | 36-45 | 7 | 13% |
| | 46-55 | 6 | 12% |
| | 56-65 | 0 | 0% |
| | 65+ | 0 | 0% |
| Gender | Male | 33 | 63% |
| | Female | 19 | 37% |
| Education level | Primary | 0 | 0% |
| | Secondary | 9 | 17% |
| | Vocational & Collage | 10 | 19% |
| | University | 33 | 64% |
| Nationality | Kazakh | 5 | 10% |
| | Chinese | 47 | 90% |

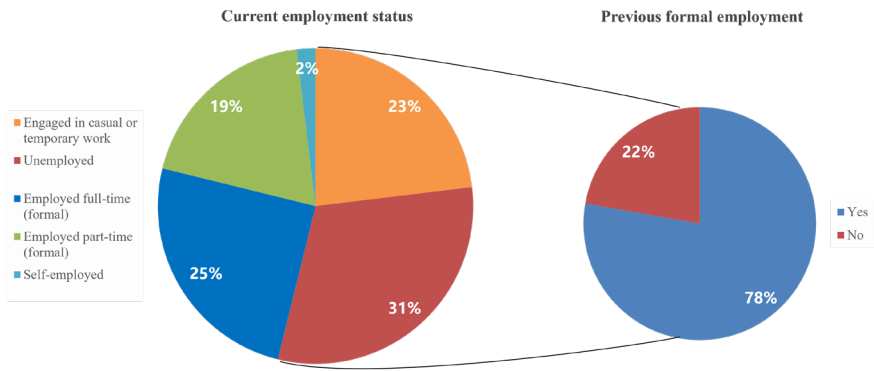
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|-------------------|------------|----|-----|
| Country of living | Kazakhstan | 25 | 48% |
| | China | 27 | 52% |

Source: author’s compilation based on survey data

Employment History and Current Status

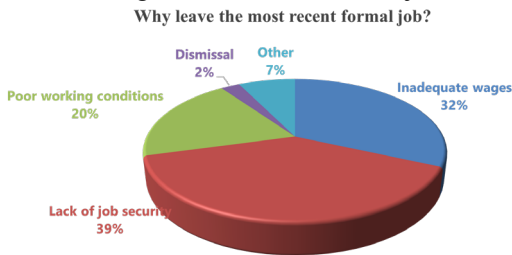
A substantial proportion of participants who were not currently employed reported having previous experience in formal employment (see Figure 1). However, many cited factors such as inadequate wages, lack of job security, and poor working conditions as reasons for leaving their formal jobs (see Figure 2). At the time of the survey, more than half of the participants were either unemployed or engaged in precarious employment arrangements, such as temporary or seasonal work. This highlights the role of employment insecurity as a push factor towards informal trade.

Figure 1. Current employment status and history



Source: authors’ compilation based on survey data

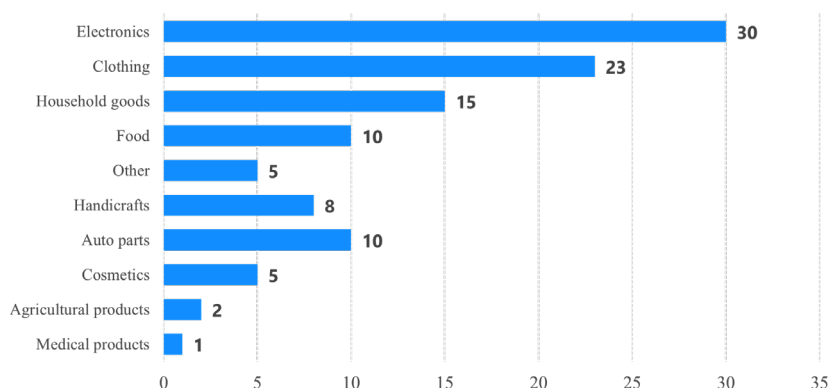
Figure 2. Reasons for leaving the most recent formal job



Source: authors’ compilation based on survey data

Informal Trade Activities

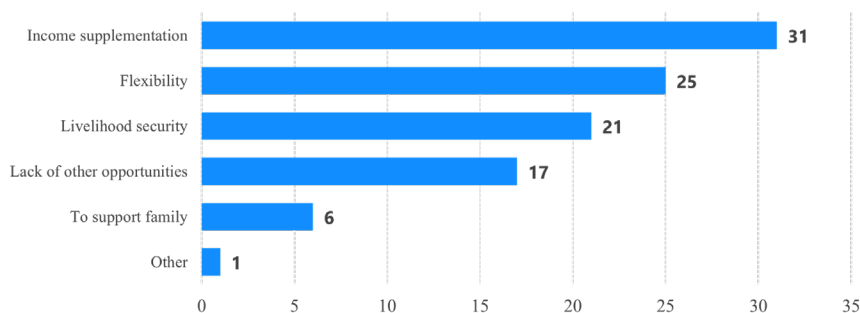
Participants engaged in various informal trade activities, primarily involving the cross-border exchange of goods. Figure 3 provides a summary of the informal trade activities reported by the participants. The range of goods traded by participants mirrored formal trade patterns between China and Kazakhstan (OEC, 2023), indicating that ICBT is not limited to a narrow range of products. This diversification reflects a complex trade relationship between the two countries, with informal traders capitalizing on opportunities in various sectors.

Figure 3. Types of goods traded

Source: authors' compilation based on survey data

Motivations for Engaging in Informal Trade

The economic motivations for engaging in informal trade primarily include income supplementation and livelihood security. A considerable number of participants engage in informal trade to supplement their income from other sources or to navigate periods of unemployment or underemployment. Additionally, informal trade serves as a safety net, enabling individuals to support themselves and their families, particularly in contexts of economic uncertainty and limited access to formal employment opportunities. Beyond economic factors, non-economic motivations also play a significant role. The flexibility and autonomy associated with informal trade appeal to many participants, as it allows them to determine their own working hours and operate their businesses independently.

Figure 4. Main reasons for engaging in informal trade

Source: authors' compilation based on survey data

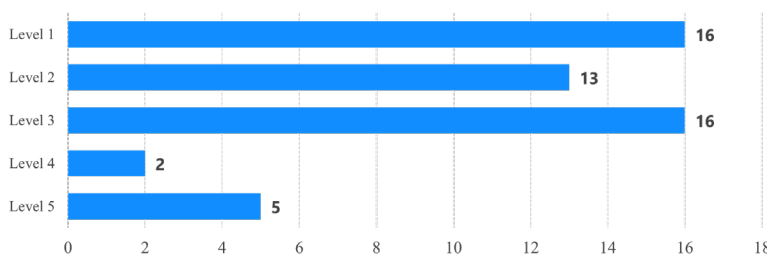
Perceptions of Employment Insecurity

The survey revealed that participants were highly concerned about job security (see Figure 5). Many expressed concerns about losing their jobs or not being able to find stable employment (see Figure 6). Access to social security benefits was limited, with many participants lacking social security benefits, such as coverage for unemployment, healthcare, or retirement. Experiences of precarious employment conditions, such as

lacking contracts and related exploitative practices, were also common (see Figure 7). This leads to significant concerns about the economic security of participants

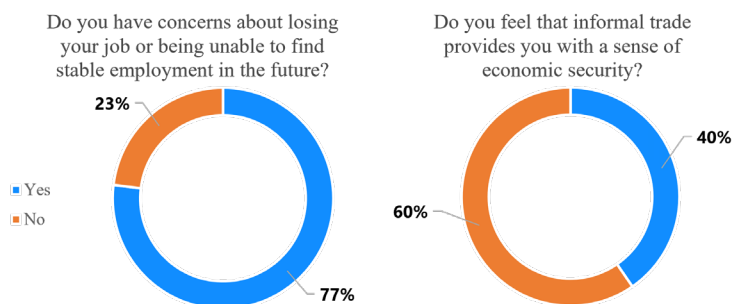
Figure 5. Overall employment security feelings

(Scale 1-5: 1 = Very Insecure, 5 = Very Secure)



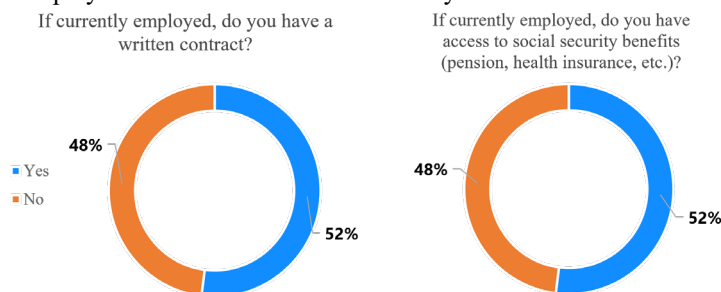
Source: authors' compilation based on survey data

Figure 6. Perceptions of employment insecurity



Source: authors' compilation based on survey data

Figure 7. Employment contract and social security benefits



Source: authors' compilation based on survey data

Employment Insecurity as a Driver of Informal Trade

The findings from the survey provide valuable evidence that employment insecurity is a driver of informal trade at the China–Kazakhstan border. Individuals facing precarious employment conditions, limited social security, and concerns about employment security often turn to informal trade as a means of generating income and ensuring their livelihoods. This aligns with previous research highlighting the link between informality and employment insecurity (Antonopoulos & Mitra, 2009; Horn,

2011; OECD/ILO, 2019). The anxieties and uncertainties associated with precarious employment push individuals to seek alternative avenues for economic survival, and informal trade, with its low barriers to entry and potential for immediate income generation, presents itself as a viable option.

The findings from this survey have important implications for labour market policies and cross-border trade regulations. Given the significant role of informal trade in providing employment and income security, policymakers should explore ways to integrate informal traders into formal economic structures without undermining their livelihoods. This could include strengthening labour market regulations, expanding access to microfinance and simplified tax regimes, and implementing targeted social protection measures to support informal workers and facilitate their transition to the formal economy. Furthermore, addressing employment insecurity requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving formal labour conditions, ensuring fair wages, and expanding job opportunities in both Kazakhstan and China. Enhanced cross-border trade policies that acknowledge and support informal trade activities could contribute to economic stability and foster regional economic cooperation. In conclusion, informal trade at the China-Kazakhstan border serves as both a livelihood strategy and a response to labour market insecurities. While it provides crucial economic opportunities, the lack of job security and social protections remains a pressing concern. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that balances regulation with support mechanisms to enhance the economic well-being of informal traders.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study offers valuable insights into the relationship between employment insecurity and informal trade at the China–Kazakhstan border. The findings underscore the role of employment insecurity as a driver of informal trade, with individuals facing precarious employment conditions often turning to this type of economic activity as a means of survival. The study also emphasizes the importance of considering the broader economic and social context, including factors such as poverty, inequality, and migration, as well as regional policies and trade corridor developments.

This study has some limitations. The findings are limited by a modest sample size, which may underrepresent informal border traders. Reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, and convenience sampling restricts generalizability. Future research should employ larger, representative samples and mixed-methods approaches to explore cross-border networks, policy impacts, and formalization pathways more comprehensively.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policy considerations. To mitigate the drivers of informality, measures must be taken to address employment insecurity. Such measures may include the promotion of job creation, the improvement of working conditions, and the expansion of social security coverage. To this end, it is also imperative to foster economic development and reduce inequality in border regions. Specific policy recommendations include the following:

Analytics in Kazakhstan acts not only as a producer of interpretations, but also as a value system in the process of evolution, reflecting not only institutional realities, but also cultural matrices, intellectual trajectories, and public expectations. Spiral dynamics in this context becomes not just an analytical tool, but also a way of mapping the future in the logic of the transition from normative to integral forms of political consciousness.

- **Strengthening labour market regulations:** Implementing and enforcing labour laws that protect workers' rights, ensure fair wages, and provide access to social security benefits can improve the quality of formal employment and reduce the attractiveness of informal alternatives.
- **Expanding social protection programs:** Providing unemployment insurance, healthcare coverage, and retirement benefits can create a safety net for individuals facing economic hardship and reduce their vulnerability to precarious employment and informal work.
- **Promoting entrepreneurship and formalization:** Supporting small businesses and providing incentives for informal businesses to register and operate within the formal economy can contribute to economic growth and reduce informality.

This study contributes to the broader fields of informal economy research, labour market studies, and international trade by providing empirical evidence on the link between employment insecurity and informal trade in a specific border region context. It highlights the complex interplay of individual motivations, economic conditions, and policy influences that shape informal trade dynamics. The findings underscore the necessity for integrated policy approaches that address both the supply-side factors (employment insecurity) and demand-side factors (market access and opportunities) that contribute to the persistence of informal trade. By examining the experiences and motivations of individuals involved in informal trade at the China–Kazakhstan border, this research offers a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities associated with informality in a dynamic and evolving economic environment. This research contributes to a more profound understanding of the factors that motivate individuals to engage in informal economic activities and the potential policy interventions that can foster more inclusive and sustainable development in border regions.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conducted all aspects of the research and manuscript preparation, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, validation, writing (original draft and review & editing), and visualization.

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