

The Striving Trap: Chinese 996 Work Culture, Online and Offline Perspectives

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in East Asian Studies
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The concerns and questions of this paper focus on what happened when Chinese Internet tech companies initiated an overtime working schedule known as “996—working from 9am to 9pm a day, six days a week—in terms of the intertwined agencies of the state, companies, and workers. I describe how, on the one hand, “996” has gradually been transformed from a specific system of work into a culture of overwork that is not merely confined to Chinese Internet tech companies but has permeated China’s employment market, attracting great attention which is embodied in substantial discussions and critiques in online spaces. These involve explanations given by celebrities, grassroots movements, and interventions by the state. On the other hand, workers, especially tech workers, are trapped by “996” in offline spaces in virtue of the future-oriented promises of the work, at the cost of having to endure present suffering, which is externalized as work-life imbalances, gender inequality, and age discrimination. I have divided this thesis into two chapters: In the first, I have arranged the abundant online materials on the discussion of “996” chronologically, in order to present how “996” has developed in the public’s view in terms of protests and movements, and in order to discuss how these movements contribute to the formation of a Chinese precariat. In the second chapter, by presenting first-person voices from 996 tech workers, I attempt to analyze the term *neijuan*, which emerges from these

discussions, alongside Xiang Biao's analysis of "suspension" and Lauren Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" in order to show the complexities, possibilities, and predicaments of the influence of "996" on the working environment in China in general.

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Dedication

For people who have the courage to speak out against injustice with love and hope.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Technology and Scientific Development, the Innovation-Based Society, and Social Transformation in Chinese Society

Clearly, China is attempting to transform its large population into an “innovation nation.”¹ In the last three decades, to support the enhancement of the country’s innovation capacities, the government has implemented a series of paramount policies and proactive plans in terms of the establishment of technological and scientific physical infrastructure and a top-down system of management that engages the government, companies, universities, and individuals. One example is the continued national project of the *Five-year Plan of Science and Technology Development*, which is currently being conducted in the period of the fourteenth five-year plan. “Innovation” in this context means the transformation of China from a nation with a “lower quality” of human capital, underdeveloped innovative capabilities, and a high degree of reliance on foreign investment and technological skills into an innovation-based society.²

Based on the historic national policy of reform and opening up proposed by Deng Xiaoping, who aimed to further the process of China’s modernization and urbanization and to engage positively with the international community, China has attracted and received enormous amounts of investment from foreign and international companies due

¹ William Lazonick, Yu Zhou, and Yifei Sun, “Introduction: China’s Transformation to an Innovation Nation,” in *China as an Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

² Richard P. Appelbaum, et al, *Innovation in China: Challenging the Global Science and Technology System* (MA: Polity Press, 2018), 27.

to its large population base and relatively lax investment environment, especially with respect to foreign capital, for the purpose of developing advanced scientific and technological skills and knowledge, and importing advanced manufacturing industries.³ However, these investments have mainly been focused on establishing factories, which has created tremendous assembly lines as supply chains to serve international companies at the expense of the exploitation of Chinese labor. Foxconn, a transnational manufacturing company that provides the supply chains for producing digital components for international tech companies, especially Apple and Samsung, has been criticized for its toxic company culture, which is known for squeezing workers in terms of unreasonable wages and intense governance of workers' mentalities and bodies.⁴ Its toxic management regime resulted in the suicides of eighteen Foxconn workers, who jumped from the company's buildings after no longer being able to tolerate the depressing exploitation. This is merely a small example of how the cost of improving the quality of human capital has been borne in China. However, it cannot be claimed that China has failed to realize this, and it has taken action to reduce the dilemmas associated with the process of modernization and to enhance the quality of social development, although this has mainly occurred in economic matters, bringing about inevitable problems regarding inequality, exploitation, and injustice. This has contributed to shaping an international

³ Andrew Ross, *Fast Boat to China: High-tech Outsourcing and the Consequences of Free Trade: Lessons from Shanghai* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 15.

⁴ Ralph Litzinger. "The Labor Question in China: Apple and Beyond," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 11 (2012): 173.

stereotype towards China, that it is a country that is highly dependent on external resources and supports in terms of investment, science, and technological knowledge, and thus that it cannot be self-reliant and even that it possesses limited capacities to create indigenous “wealth” regarding creative culture, knowledge, and skills. In this regard, China has envisioned the development of science and technology as a critically important method to move beyond its perceived stagnation regarding the low quality of its modernization and urbanization. Such a dilemma is juxtaposed with “techno-solutionism,” described by Silvia M. Lindtner as “the construal of complex social and economic inequalities as problems that can be solved by technological solutions,”⁵ rationalizing the accumulation of capital and the economic domination of the human environment under the camouflage of progress and development.

Still, why does technology empower a particular expected future in China? What promises are made by technological development? These questions help us to investigate emerging consequences in this new era when China is intensifying its emphasis on technological independence and an innovation-driven mode of development. The technological promise, in China’s case, is what Lindtner calls a *displacement of technological promise* that provides a dreamed future, enabled by technology, to the places, organizations, and even people that have historically been subjected to violence

⁵ Silvia M. Lindtner, *Prototype Nation: China and the Contested Promise of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 3.

and loss in the course of development. This allows us to see that violence and loss could be endured for the sake of a future of technological promise in terms of “modern technological progress and a good life—the promise to be at last freed from colonial and racial ‘othering’.”⁶ In this regard, China’s imagination of social transformation and progress through technological development turns out to be political, and becomes a national commitment that involves the agencies of the government, of companies, and of individuals. Its technological promise is a top-down hierarchy that “prototypes” its nation as raw materials to achieve a certain future or dream, as Lindtner argues. Accordingly, it is not simply a matter of social development via technological progress but a burden that falls on the people.

1.2 Evidence of the Burden on the Individual: The Death of “Pinduoduo Girl”

Let me begin by telling a true story. A 23-year-old female employee whose workname was Runfei (润肺) collapsed unconscious on the street while she was walking with her workmates from their place of work to her home. She was sent to the hospital by her workmates but could not be revived, and after six hours she dies at 1:30 am on December 29th, 2020. After Runfei attained her bachelor’s degree from a “Project 985” university in China, one of the most reputable universities in China, she got her first full-time job in the giant Chinese Internet tech company Pinduoduo because of the relatively

⁶ Lindtner, 5.

good salary conditions, though her dream job was a position in a music company, since she was a campus singer. Runfei's job was supposed to be based in Shanghai, but after a year she was persuaded by her employer to transfer to Urumqi, Xinjiang to manage her company's new business *Duoduo Maicai*, a community group-buying project initiated during the COVID-19 period. Due to the policy of social distancing and quarantine, online platforms have become a popular business opportunity for e-commerce companies in China to sell daily necessities. Meituan, known for its convenient and rapid food delivery services, developed the online community group-buying service first and it was soon followed by other platform companies such as Pinduoduo. Pinduoduo has devoted enormous amounts of human capital and financial support to the task of delivering single orders of fresh cakes. According to one of the workers in this new project, working late at night became a normal occurrence for her and her workmates in order to resolve conflicts between merchandisers, vegetable providers, and the online platform operated by Pinduoduo. Runfei's job was to maintain the daily operations of the offline warehouses and to communicate with vegetable providers and merchants. However, the causal work content of Runfei's job was gradually fragmented into dealing with trivial oral quarrels. The Duoduo Maicai platform enjoyed pricing superiority due to its direct stocking of food from farmers, and as a result its lower prices were opposed by merchandisers whose businesses were negatively affected by the unparalleled market prices; angry

merchandisers often gathered in front of the warehouses expressing their resistance by impeding other employees' work.⁷ A multiplication tasks pushed Runfei to work longer and harder, and as a result she was often overworked and had no time to rest. Before her sudden death, she had just updated the introduction to her online work profile with the sentence "Guarding the frontier for *duoduo* (为多多守边疆)," which expressed her firm devotion to the company and her work.

This is not a story about the loyalty and responsibility of people who will work until they die, but a sad story that exposes the cruel and brutal side of jobs in Internet tech companies. Although it is difficult to confirm their authenticity, after Runfei's death, many related online messages were posted by anonymous netizens who claimed they were workers from Pinduoduo. One post described a couple of workers who graduated from college and accepted a job offer from Pinduoduo because of its relatively good salary promises. Like Runfei, they were implicitly forced by the company to join the Duoduo Maicai project, irrespective of what department they were from. Beyond their managers' persuasive conversations, workers were told that their job promotion chances were tightly linked to this new project. Junior workers lack work experience, but in the meantime they have ideas about their work in terms of expectations of making contributions and getting more chances to be promoted and improve their salaries. In this

⁷ Yangyang Wu et al, "23 岁员工猝死背后, 是拼多多的“开疆拓土” (Behind the sudden death of 23-year-old employee is the “opening of the frontier” of Pinduoduo)" *Yicai News*, January 05, 2021. <https://www.yicai.com/news/100901380.html>.

regard, they could hardly refuse the “golden chance” that was packaged with expectation and promises for a better future. The death of Runfei, though, revealed for many the cruel truth that the future may be worse rather than better.

Before Pinduoduo publicly responded, the news of Runfei’s death had gone viral on the Internet, particularly on Chinese social media platforms like the major microblogging platform Weibo and the Chinese version of Quora, Zhihu. Under one post about Runfei’s death on Zhihu, which asked questions like “What are your comments on the online news of Pinduoduo’s employee who died from overwork? What are Pinduoduo’s responsibilities?”, Pinduoduo’s official account responded:

Looking at the subaltern people, which one is not exchanging their lives for money? I don’t think it is a problem of capital but a problem of society. This is a period of struggling at the expense of life. You can choose a comfortable lifestyle, but at the same time you must choose the results of being comfortable. Human beings can control their efforts, so do we.⁸

⁸ Translated by author.

如何看待网传拼多多员工加班后猝死一事？拼多多需要承担哪些责任？



Figure 1: Screenshot of Pinduoduo's official account in Zhihu

This post was quickly captured by Chinese netizens and spread quickly on the Internet, though the original post only stayed up for 30 minutes and was then deleted. After three days, Pinduoduo publicly addressed Runfei's death without explaining the reason for the deletion. In the official statement, the company also refused to admit that the Zhihu post was made on behalf of the company, blaming it instead on an individual mistake—it occurred because the employee who managed the company's official account was expressing his own thoughts and forgot to switch back to his personal account to do

so. These indifferent words revealed the complicated and contradictory struggles occurring in contemporary Chinese society with respect to people's self-accomplishment, mobility, and the developmental transformation of the whole society. Runfei's story is the worst version of a story that is common to many Chinese workers, especially for younger Chinese who are new to the wider society when they just graduate from school and start to work, but it is not unique. The sudden death of workers in Chinese Internet tech companies occurred repeatedly. There is no doubt that jobs in Internet tech companies offer competitive salaries and relative welfare, but the cost is burning through a worker's life and health both mentally and physically.

My intention here is not to criticize Internet tech companies and all the positions they provide, since they have provided technological convenience and optimal opportunities for people who are chasing the dream of technological innovation and technological reformation. What I wish to emphasize is the exploitation of labor as a result of the intertwined forces of capitalism and the developmental processes of social transformation which are dominant in Chinese society. Every time I revisit the story of the "Pinduoduo girl," I understand more about her choice in voluntarily overworking in order to achieve the (unguaranteed) prospects of job promotion and the improved salaries that would be paid after her hard work. This is the worst version of the story and the most disappointed moment—what you get after you are paid so much, get a good job with a good salary, and work hard all the time.

1.3 A Brief Introduction to Chinese Internet Tech Companies and “996”

Although direct evidence and reports that explained or linked Runfei’s sudden death to her working conditions were lacking, the event aroused the passions of Chinese netizens in the discussions that resulted about the overtime situation prevalent in China’s employment environments. On the platform Weibo, “996” was one of the trending hashtags about the incident and has been reviewed and discussed by millions of netizens; thousands of netizens lamented Runfei’s death, decried Pinduoduo’s indifferent response, and expressed their own experiences, sufferings, and understandings of “996.” The death of Runfei once again exposed the issue of “996” to Chinese society. “996” refers to a work schedule which requires employees to work from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week. It was first proposed by Huawei, the giant Internet tech company in China.⁹ The emergence of “996” is closely connected to the development of Internet tech companies in China.

During the late 1990s, the best-known current Internet tech companies, such as Tencent (known for its digital platform product WeChat), Alibaba, and Huawei, were created and gradually grew to their present sizes due to the policy of reform and opening up. After major international platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram were blocked in China in 2014, Chinese Internet tech companies were encouraged by the government to develop their own digital products, and several other new start-up tech

⁹ “996 这个词汇是什么时候产生的, 最早是哪一家公司以实行 996 工作制为人所知? (When did the term 996 come into being, and which company was first known for implementing the 996 working system?) ” Zhihu, April 11, 2019, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/319575322>.

companies emerged in the digital platform market. Bytedance, in particular, is famous for its product Tiktok, which has been embraced by huge numbers of international consumers. To prop up technological development and innovation, China initiated and released a series of policies and official documents, such as the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan in 2012, which drew international attention for its goal of making China a world-leading AI developer by 2030. Due to state support in terms of policies and the longer trend of development, Chinese Internet tech companies have driven economic development in the digital economy, contributing more to China's GDP growth than other forms of economic development.

Due to the generally favorable environment in terms of policy encouragement and competitive capital accumulation, Chinese Internet tech companies have come to be perceived as optimal workplaces for earning better salaries and gaining prestigious experience. In addition, since most Chinese Internet tech companies began as new start-up tech companies, their reputations and business experiences are less competitive than those of foreign companies; in order to attract and hire talented tech workers, they seek to embrace skilled people with any degree of education or political status.¹⁰ Further, most Internet tech companies are clustered in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, which possess favorable advantages of location and population expediency. This provides external quality of life and welfare for their employees, especially the

¹⁰ It should be noted that applicants who are members of the Communist Party are perceived favorably, but a general principle is that the leadership of the Communist Party should be recognized.

migrant workers who arrive from smaller and less developed cities or even non-urban areas. By working in Internet tech companies, these workers are able to gain access to household registration in their city of work, thereby accomplishing their aspirations of social mobility and even promoting the fortunes of their families.

While the advantages of working in Internet tech companies are fairly clear, their normal working schedule (“996”) became a major problem in terms of labor rights, and had a tremendous effect on the more general working environment in China.¹¹ As I mentioned, the 996 working schedule was first introduced by Huawei, an Internet tech company whose company culture is described as a “wolf culture,” in which employees are encouraged to maximize efficiency and endure temporary suffering for the purpose of future outcomes. According to the earliest records that can be found on the Internet, Huawei implemented the “996” work schedule in 2010, specifically for tech workers involved in software engineering so that they would achieve technological innovations in less time. The “trick” played by these companies is that “996” is not technically in contravention of the Chinese labor law which establishes the length of the normal working day at 8 hours, because companies that implement the “996” work schedule do pay their employees extra salaries as overtime wages. However, careful analysis of these systems of payment reveals that they do not conform to the formal way of accounting for

¹¹ “两会輿声：万字报告深度分析‘996’和互联网劳工輿情 (The Sound of Public Opinion at the Two Meetings: 10,000 Word Report on In-Depth Analysis of ‘996’ and Internet Labor Opinion),” *Tencent* online, March 10, 2021, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20210310/20210310A0CJS700.html>.

employee's basic wages according to Chinese labor law. Therefore, "996" was implemented among tech workers who were expected to contribute more value under the pressure of limited timeframes and high expectation of productivity. This seriously decreased efficiency and motivation on the part of tech workers, which led to the emergence in March 2019 of an online anti-996 movement organized by tech workers who had been subjected to 996 for a long time. Along with the "996.ICU" online movement launched by a group of well-educated tech workers, the critique of 996 has spread more widely to other groups following the expanded application of "996" work schedules to more diverse types of workplaces. The influence of Internet tech companies set an example for small-scale companies and new start-up companies who adopted that mode of management; however, the lack of experience and human capital in such companies can lead to even more extreme manipulation of the "996" work schedule, resulting in even more extreme labor exploitation.

In fact, the exposure of overtime working conditions in China that the "996" movement undertakes is by no means a new phenomenon. Suicides of Foxconn workers have been reported since 2010, and the over-exploited assembly line Foxconn workers who suffer intense overwork requirements have been known to the public for a long time. Compared with the tech workers who are able to express their complaints and appeals by incorporating their technical skills and the influence of social media to put pressure on their companies, the miserable working conditions endured by Foxconn workers did not gain much attention from the public due to the powerlessness of their voices until the

suicides occurred. The broad exposure of “996” and its critique seemingly reveals an important class gap that is embedded in the privilege of elites and middle-class workers, since “996” workers do indeed have access to more social resources than Foxconn migrant workers (their educational background, for example). However, I understand “996” as an emerging social phenomenon that is connected to a broader division between social classes, between upper and lower social strata, rich and poor, that is occurring in contemporary Chinese society, if we consider that even well-educated workers are experiencing precarious working conditions. Hence, what I am attempting to do in this thesis is to look at discourse of “996” in the context of Chinese society. This is not just to describe a group of privileged workers who enjoy superior access to social resources, while they complain about their work making them tired and unhappy at the same time. Instead, I want to reveal a dynamic formation and change “996” in terms of offline and online following the behind social forces.

1.4 Other Discourses: Problems of Orientalism, Social Reproduction, and Algorithms

Erin Y. Huang has used the term neoliberal post-socialism to identify the irreconcilable relationship between capitalism and socialism in contemporary Chinese society.¹² The “996” work schedule is a problem through processes similar to the ones Lindtner describes as outcomes of China’s extremely rapid modernization and the

¹² Erin Y. Huang, *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.

intervention of capitalism into a previous socialist society. In the case of China, the highly state-dominated surveillance regime continually collides with as well as incorporates capitalism.¹³ During the summer in which I conducted research in Shenzhen, I saw a road sign hanging above a fork in the road. The left turn directed you to Foxconn, and the right one to Huawei. This scene symbolizes two very different patterns of labor exploitation that share one fundamental similarity—they are outcomes of the transformation of Chinese society.

Chinese society is undergoing a tremendous transformation. Known for its large population and the “quality” of its human resources, China has attracted enormous amounts of foreign capital to create manufacturing industries, at the cost of intense labor exploitation and the extraction of natural resources. For a nation that had long been perceived by international opinion as backward, non-innovative, and uncreative, “making was ideal for the CCP to portray what was fundamentally a Neoliberal strategy as serving the hopes and dreams of people.”¹⁴ This generated a nation-wide demand that its people “self-upgrade into optimistic, economic agents who drove innovation and who built their own jobs rather than relying on the state.”¹⁵ Here a double-orientalism of the Chinese occurs, first emerging the foreign community and then perpetuated by the Chinese government. But what is different in this situation is that Lindtner explains this how

¹³ Huang, 7.

¹⁴ Lindtner, 29.

¹⁵ See note 12 above.

otherness is perceived as an opportunity by both the Chinese government and the West in order to construct a place of high-tech utopia, but one that is nonetheless interweaved with inequalities of race, class, and gender. These problems are the inevitable results of the rapid development of society, the transformational model of development, and the resulting high pressure of social competition to “catch up” with the new direction of social development. In this sense, could “996” be understood as an unintended outcome that emerged in the process of accomplishing the transformation of Chinese society?

Beyond the problems associated with converting labor-intensive manufacturing industries into a technology- and innovation-driven mode of development, Chinese society has also confronted problems of social reproduction due to the continually decreasing fertility. In order to increase the fertility rate, China proposed the two-child policy in 2015 and further implemented the three-child policy in 2020. In fact, beyond the high costs associated with giving birth, the “996” work schedule is doubtless one of the factors that contribute to China’s decreased birth rate. The dominance of “996” reduces up young workers’ leisure time, which is a de facto killer of “time, sex, and life.”¹⁶

Previous discussions of the 996 working schedule and Chinese tech companies have also touched on the notion of platform capitalism proposed by Nick Srnicek in his analysis of ethical problems emerging from the use of algorithms, the privacy of users’

¹⁶ Zheping Huang, “No sleep, no sex, no life: tech workers in China’s Silicon Valley face burnout before they reach 30”, South China Morning Post, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-social/article/3002533/no-sleep-no-sex-no-life-tech-workers-chinas-silicon-valley-face>.

digital information, and competition among giant tech companies.¹⁷ In the Chinese context, one major problem is constituted by the precarious employment status and informal work arrangements of Chinese delivery-people, which involve the juxtaposition of problematic algorithms and platform capitalism, broadening the possibilities of labor exploitation. Chinese delivery-people are workers who are hired by digital platform companies, such as Meituan, a tech company that is popular among Chinese costumers for its fast and convenient service delivering food and other life necessities. However, such a service is deeply dependent on physical work and the resulting labor exploitation. Delivery-people's wages are highly dependent on the algorithms that organize their work, and their bodies are placed in precarious positions due to the regularly occurring accidents and insecure employment insurance.¹⁸ Comparable to the "996" working schedule, delivery-people experience hours of work which even exceed the "996" schedule. They are compelled to work at any time based on the demands of the digital platform.

1.5 Researching 996 Work Culture

Discussions regarding Chinese Internet tech companies and the 996 working schedule reveal how profit-driven companies and their systems of labor management deeply influence the lives of Chinese people in every aspect. Among the complex set of

¹⁷ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2016), 10.

¹⁸ Youxuan Lai, "外卖骑手, 被困在系统里 (Delivery Rider, Stuck in the System)", Renwu, access September 07, 2020, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/225120404>.

work injustices in China, “996” as a specific work schedule makes it possible to discern the structural problems that emerge from the situated combination of different agencies, including the Chinese state, companies, and workers. This article will take the “996” work schedule as an entry point to explore and analyze the conundrum of the contradictory status of workers who are trapped in the “996” system, in order to question the promises made by work, and even the contemporary Chinese state.

This thesis will be divided into two chapters. The first will discuss the online discourse of the “996” system. The second will discuss the offline reality of “996” workers’ interactions with that work culture, incorporating digital ethnography and my field research conducted from June 2021 to August 2021. In the first chapter, which focuses on the period 2019-2022, I incorporate the methodology of digital ethnography by using online materials like Weibo posts, self-made videos, and media comments to analyze the exposure of the 966 system through online platforms and the movements and protests that emerge from them—“996.ICU” and “Workers’ Lives Matter”—in order to further research on the discourses of the Chinese precariat. Since the 996 work schedule emerged into the view of the public, it has generated a diverse discussion among a number of subjects. I will describe and compare different voices and opinions on 996 work culture, and examine the spirit of striving that lies behind it (derived from Chinese term *fendou*). The recent emergence of two major discourses—lying flat (*tangping*) and touching fish (*moyu*)—reveals another type of resistance in a context of strict state

ensorship. The main problem will be how to evaluate this series of movements in the analyses of the Chinese precariat.

By switching to the perspective of the offline world in the second chapter, I attempt to describe the real interactions between workers and the 996 system in daily work and life, based on my two-month field research and interviews of tech workers in Beijing and Shenzhen. Focusing on questions of workers' work-life balance, I will discuss dilemmas faced by working-class parents in oscillating between work and life, juxtaposing these dilemmas with issues of gender inequality, hyper-competitiveness, and the more critical discourse of *neijuan* that expresses the Chinese people's anxieties aroused from hyper-competition in every aspect of life. Using the theoretical insights provided by Xiang Biao's discussion of "suspension" and Luaren Berlant's discussion of "cruel optimism," I argue that the relationship between workers and the 996 work schedule is ultimately premised on workers' mobility, and that such mobility finally results in immobility.

2. The Precariat in China: Exposure, Debates, and Protests around 996 Work Culture in the Online World

2.1 Introduction

With regard to 996 workers—workers at big companies such as Chinese Internet tech companies with a 996 work schedule—it is useful to ask whether they can be regarded as a new precariat in China because it can shed light on the intensification of precarity in contemporary Chinese society in terms of conflicts between labor and capital and inter-class conflicts. According to Guy Standing, changes to capitalist production at a global scale brought about by neo-liberalism are widely considered to be the cause of the emergence of the precariat.¹⁹ The global environment of precarity that causes employment and work insecurity is occurring in China as well. While “precarity” refers to the insecure, irregular, and flexible status of employment, the precariat refers to a specific labor group who are commonly defined as a “dangerous class.” Academic discussions of the precariat in China focus mainly on whether it is appropriate to refer the precariat as a new working class. Previous academic work classified migrant workers as part of the precariat. Ching Kwan Lee has argued that the empowerment argument which relates to workers’ power and potential labor resistance is grounded in a false optimism that the working class is capable of developing class awareness.²⁰ In Standing’s *The Precariat in China: A Comment on Conceptual Confusion*, he points out three

¹⁹ Guy Standing. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 7.

²⁰ Ching Kwan Lee, “Precarization or empowerment? Reflections on recent labor unrest in China.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no.2 (2016): 317-333. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021911815002132>.

dimensions in defining the precariat in the context of China: the relations of production in which they exist, the relations of distribution, and their relations to the state. He uses things like employment situation, worker identity, and the legal system to compare the European precariat to Chinese migrant workers.²¹ Standing's perspective has been criticized by other scholars. For example, Chris Smith and Ngai Pun deconstructed the relationship between class and precarity by pointing out that Standing "creates the precariat not out of capital-labor conflicts, where power asymmetries are well known, but presumed labor-labor conflicts—internal divisions within the working class, with those in regular/standard employment judged a privileged 'salarial'."²² They argue that inventing different categories of employment rather than examining the specific interactions of workers on different kinds of contracts in production relations inhibits research on employment and social class, because it obscures the fact that Chinese laborers "band together along lines of common class interest in cultures of solidarity."²³

In the "new area," declared by Xi Jinping in 2018, 996 work culture is essentially an indicator of the intensified precariousness of Chinese labor in contemporary China. The 996 work schedule has been applied to a large portion of the working population with various social backgrounds and capabilities. The experiences and suffering

²¹ Guy Standing, "The Precariat in China: A Comment on Conceptual Confusion," *Rural China* 14, no. 1 (2017): pp. 165-170, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22136746-01401009>.

²² Chris Smith and Ngai Pun, "Class and Precarity: An Unhappy Coupling in China's Working Class Formation," *Work, Employment and Society* 32, no. 3 (2018): 601, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018762276>.

²³ Chris Smith and Ngai Pun, 612

associated with it occur with elite tech leaders who have access to significant social resources. Their priorities are different than those of migrant workers who have difficulties accessing social welfare or even officially registering in the national household registration system, known as the *hukou* system, in the large cities where Internet tech companies are typically located. To analyze these differences it is necessary first to objectively describe the downsides of the 996 work schedule and its influence. Distinguished from the precariat, Standing defines “proficians” as people who “have skills and qualifications that give them assurance that they will retain an occupational identity.”²⁴ However, workers who are perceived as having more social privilege or social priority than migrant workers are themselves now confronting similar employment exploitation and insecurity, in terms of mandated overtime, lower wages, and the governing of their bodies. This conflicts with Richard Seymour’s claim that “we are all the precariat,” in which one is subjectified as member of “the people” in opposition to the “power bloc” in order “to shatter the illusory security of our rulers.” But this obscures the necessarily existing gaps and stratifications between workers.²⁵ I argue that 996 work culture indicates an upward shift in the precarity of Chinese labor, which simultaneously limits workers’ mobility.

²⁴ Standing 2017, 168.

²⁵ Richard Seymour, “We Are All Precarious: On the Concept of the precariat and its misuses,” Patreon, June 6, 2020, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/we-are-all-on-of-37918050>.

2.2 Exposing “996” from a Single Voice to Collective Movements

As, historically, industrialization thoroughly changed people’s ideas and experiences of time, the tech industry has been a place with especially strictest rules regarding employee’s time. Clocks tell time, of course, but they are also an instrument for minutely governing worker’s working time. In the case of “996,” it is no more a new form of governance and exploitation of worker’s bodies and time than that imposed on workers on assembly lines. This is why Chinese netizens jokingly call these Internet tech companies “big industries” (in the sense of industrial manufacturing). Workers in Internet tech companies are no more than a screw placed in a particular spot to guarantee the smooth overall operation of the company. Nevertheless, Internet and online platforms offer workers a chance to speak out, making visible the invisible conditions of labor.

Suffering normally happens before it is known. The question of when China’s “996” working schedule became known to the public is commonly brought up in discussions and analyses of “996,” both domestically and overseas. This is partly because companies do not reveal their working schedules to the public until discussion of the problems is too widespread to ignore. Although Huawei is known as the first tech company to officially implement the 996 work system in China, according to information posted on Zhihu in 2019, online discussion of 996 began in 2016 through anonymous post by a 996 employee, and then intensified in 2019 because of an online protest.

In 2016, an employee posted anonymously on a digital social platform, Momo, saying that his or her company, 58.com Inc, an Internet tech company, sent an official

email to all of its employees announcing that they would be required to begin a 996 work system in their department, without any guarantee of additional payment or subsidies for overtime.²⁶ Immediately, this story gained exposure as other users of Momo posted about similar experiences in 58.com Inc. Attention gathered and discussions thrived, and then moved to other major social media platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu. The CEO of 58.com, Yao Jinqin received thousands of messages from people who were either his employees or common netizens, expressing their resistance to the brutal 996 work schedule. (The employee turnover rate at the company also increased in this period.)²⁷ Later, 58.com responded that their overtime practice should be understood as flexible rather than forceful, and temporarily relented during peak workload periods. This claim was rejected by an ex-employee of 58.com who was interviewed by state media, the Beijing News (2016): “Before I accepted the job offer, I was informed by an HR person that our department would work overtime at the end of month to boost their sales figures before my employment began; but I discovered that overtime work is normalized here. Although the company says that it is up to employees to work overtime or not, if we are unwilling to do so, we are required to ask for leave. Otherwise they will deduct wages.”²⁸

As a result of substantial criticism and pressure from the public, 58.com publicly

²⁶ “58 同城被曝实行全员‘996’ (58.com was exposed to the implementation of the full staff ‘996’)”, *China Finance Daily*, September 02, 2016, <https://finance.qq.com/a/20160902/035567.htm>.

²⁷ “58 同城员工吐槽‘996 工作制’官方称并非强制 (58.com employees complained about 996 working schedule, and the official said they do not mandate it)”, *Sohu*, September 03, 2016, https://www.sohu.com/a/113431668_114988.

²⁸ “58 同城员工吐槽‘996 工作制’ (58.com employees complained about 996 working schedule)”, *The Beijing News* online, September 03, 2016, http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2016-09/03/content_650750.htm?div=1.

promised that they would postpone the implementation of the 996 schedule. News following the scandal, though, revealed that they still encouraged overtime work in 2017.²⁹



Figure 2: Momo users organize an online "anti-996 campaign" alliance to resist 58.com's 996 work schedule

Nevertheless, this temporary achievement of labor rights at 58.com and negative publicity have not convinced other tech companies to forego the use of 996 work schedules. When the first user created a project on GitHub on March 26, 2019, a formal

²⁹ “通过加班来裁员，真的有老板这么做？(Layoffs through Work Overtime, Do Any Bosses Really Do That?),” JMedia, March 17, 2017, <https://www.jiemian.com/article/1177097.html>.

online anti-996 protest was organized, called “996.ICU.” Using the slogan “Working 996 will push you to into the ICU (Intensive Care Unit),” the protest was organized by a group of tech workers to resist companies using the exploitative 996 working schedule. Coming from different backgrounds and working in different companies, activists who participated in the protest posted anonymously on GitHub, listing companies that used 996 work schedules and discussing their working environments. They created two crowdsourced lists, a “black list” and a “white list,” and called on other tech workers and non-tech employees to add the names of 996 companies and non-996 companies. Companies like Alibaba and Huawei that appeared on the “black list” were confronted with the threat that they would not be able to acquire licenses for certain open-source projects if they insisted on implementing a 996 working.³⁰ The “996.ICU” project became the second most popular project on GitHub and the number of posts increased to 200,000 in the two weeks after its establishment.³¹

In addition to directly opposing the 996 work schedule, anonymous tech workers use the project as a platform to express their thoughts safely and to expose the unreasonable working systems used by certain Chinese tech companies. At first, they used the issues pages, which were originally utilized by programmers for posting

³⁰ JS Tan, “Why the 996.ICU Movement Must not be Forgotten in the United States”, *Science for the People Magazine*, December 21, 2021, <https://magazine.scienceforthepeople.org/rereading-china/996icu-not-be-forgotten/>.

³¹ Li Xiaotian, “The 996.ICU Movement in China: Changing Employment Relations and Labour Agency in the Tech Industry,” *Made in China Journal*, July 25, 2019, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/06/18/the-996-icu-movement-in-china-changing-employment-relations-and-labour-agency-in-the-tech-industry/>.

troublesome codebase.³² Later, they began to use the forum to share their personal experiences of being forced to work overtime and then compared their working conditions across different companies. Each subsection of the website requires professional programming knowledge to understand it and make modifications, making it a relatively safe space for employees to speak freely. Nevertheless, tech companies took action to suppress the campaign and silence dissenting tech workers. Alibaba and Tencent, for example, blocked the URL of the “996.ICU” website from their web browsers. The website could easily be accessed via other browsers such as Chrome, however.



Figure 3: A screenshot from "996.ICU" website.

Although the “996.ICU” movement involves and is limited to a small number of employees in a specific type of occupation (compared with the overall number of workers

³² Tan, 2021.

who work under 996 conditions in China, a country with strict censorship and high levels of suppression of protests, what the “996.ICU” online protest achieved was substantial enough that it attracted the attention of the Chinese state. The major Chinese official newspaper, *People’s Daily*, reported on the 996 work schedule three times after the emergence of the “996.ICU” movement. Two reports were titled “996 Working Hours will Send You to the ICU: The Labor Inspection Department Should Intervene”³³, and “Mandating Overtime Work Should Not be Part of a Company’s Culture.”³⁴ This marks the moment at which the state officially intervened into the rampant use of the 996 work schedule.

Although many tech companies that were identified as practicing excessive overtime did not significantly change their system of labor management at that time, the website still exists and more workers than ever participate in it, and a movement is emerging from it. In 2021, inspired by the “996.ICU” online protest and the Black Lives Matter movement, a grassroots online spreadsheet was created on GitHub. Organizers asked Chinese employees to report their actual working time. The group was called “Workers’ Lives Matter,” but this was later changed to “Working Time” as a result of

³³ People’s Daily (@ren min ri bao). “工作 996 生病 ICU, 劳动监察部门应积极介入(996 working hours will send you to the ICU, the labor inspection department should intervene)”, Weibo, April 5, 2019, <https://m.weibo.cn/2803301701/4357697258275940>

³⁴ People’s Daily (@ren min ri bao). “强制加班不应成企业文化 (Mandating working overtime should not be a company’s culture)”, Weibo, April 10, 2019, <https://m.weibo.cn/2803301701/4359826651863700>.

political censorship.³⁵ Twenty-four hours after its inception, the online database had received more than 5,000 responses, with contributors providing detailed working schedules in terms of the time it took to get to work and then return home, lunch hours, and dinner hours.³⁶ Although the original reason for collecting data and spreading the online spreadsheet was to help job seekers evaluate offers and make the best employment decisions, because of its popularity and the large number of participants it soon came to be used as a “weapon” for workers to target and fight back against the 996 work schedule that is so pervasive in the contemporary Chinese employment market. The 996 work schedule has also been incorporated into diverse industries such as architecture, education, and real estate, and so is no longer restricted to tech companies.

Besides operating at a larger scale (compared with the “996.ICU” protest), “Workers’ Lives Matter” is also organized by younger employees who are generally younger than 25 years old. Subsequent participants who acquire the spreadsheet, although they do not provide related working information, are typically college interns or college graduates who are looking for their first job.³⁷ As Standing points out, “the youth” is one of the figures of China’s precariat.³⁸ Bruno Estrada provides the term “educated precariat,” which can be incorporated into our analysis of these two well-organized

³⁵ Kayla He, “‘Worker Lives Matter’ Spurs Discussion on Chinese Social Media,” RADII, October 14, 2021, <https://radiichina.com/worker-lives-matter/>.

³⁶ Zhang Wanqing and Li Jiaru, “Chinese Workers Bring New Weapon to Overtime Fight: A Spreadsheet,” Sixth Tone, October 16, 2021, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008717/chinese-workers-bring-new-weapon-to-overtime-fight-a-spreadsheet>.

³⁷ He, 2021.

³⁸ Standing 2017, 167.

online protests.³⁹ The “educated precariat” is defined by its “status inconsistency,” which indicates “people who have a relatively high formal education but are forced to accept jobs or income status well below those considered in accordance with their qualifications” and people “who in addition to high formal qualifications required within the labor market, also have high levels of general education and personal initiative.”⁴⁰ The “996.ICU” and “Workers’ Lives Matter” protests represent a “new social demand” identified by Estrada and demonstrate an intensification of precarious labor status in the present stage of urbanization and modernization in China. These protests, first initiated by tech workers but then aligning with other workers in diverse occupations, are forming a working-class identity and a capacity to mobilize collectively.⁴¹

2.3 Opposite Views of “996”: The Gap between Tech Company CEOs and Employees

In ideal terms, China seems to provide the possibility of work-life balance for employees. The Chinese Labor Law limits work time to eight hours per day or 44 hours a week, with overtime established at a maximum 36 hours per month.⁴² When it comes to critiques of the 996 work schedule, one major question is why most Chinese Internet tech companies persist in implementing and maintaining an apparently illegal work schedule. To answer this question, it is helpful to listen to the managers of “996” companies.

³⁹ Bruno Estrada, “Who Will Represent the Educated Precariat?” *Revolt Europe*, September 27, 2013, <https://revoltingeurope.wordpress.com/2013/09/27/who-will-represent-the-educated-precariat/>.

⁴⁰ Estrada, 2013.

⁴¹ Simth and Pun, 612.

⁴² Weijing Chen (@zhong guo xin wen zhou kan), “996 明确违法,之后呢? (What happens after “996” is clearly illegal?)”, Weibo, September 06, 2021, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404678418347458769>.

After the “996.ICU” movement and the resulting increased awareness from the state, the 996 work schedule appeared more and more often on Chinese social media platforms and in news reports, which used the abbreviated term “996.” The discussion generated diverse debates, analysis, and representations, and reached a peak in 2019. CEOs of companies that use the 996 schedules have voiced their own opinions on the matter. The most contentious opinion is expressed in Ma Yun’s (Jack Ma’s) speech on the 996 work schedule to employees of Alibaba. Ma Yun, the founder and CEO of Alibaba, is well known for becoming a billionaire despite not being highly educated or having a prestigious family background. He posted the transcript of his speech on “996” on his personal Weibo account, which is called “The Representative of Village Teachers—Ma Yun” (乡村教师代言人—马云). The first paragraph says:

“996” is a hot topic in China now, and many companies have this problem. In my view, those who work “996” gain a huge fortune. Many enterprises and people expect to work “996” but are unable to get the chance. If you don’t work 996 when you are young, when will you do so? Are you proud of yourself if you are never doing “996” in your whole life? In this world, everyone hopes to be successful, to live a happy life, and to be respected by others. I want to ask you: how can you achieve the success you dream of, if you don’t put out more effort than others in energy and time?⁴³

What Ma Yun intends to express in his speech can be understood as a sense of 996 as a privilege. As Gerhard Lenski reminds us, privilege is intertwined with the theory of social stratification in terms of competing sets of classifications, of which class

⁴³ Yun Ma (@xiang cun jiao shi dai yan ren – ma yun), “马云谈 996: 能够 996 是修来的福报, 很多人想做没机会 (Ma Yun’s talk on 996: 996 is a huge blessing which many people want to work but fail to get the chance)”, Weibo, April 12, 2019, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3291793.

stratification is one of the most prominent.⁴⁴ He defines a class as “an aggregation of persons in a society who stand in a similar position with respect to some form of power, privilege, or prestige.”⁴⁵ In Ma Yun’s case, he distinguishes employees who are working 996 from other working-class employees who do not work on this schedule. Following the 996 work schedule is the privilege of those employees who deserve to receive higher salaries, opportunities for promotion, and the satisfaction of being hard-working people. In Ma’s perspective, working 996 is essentially equivalent to being hard-working. When Ma Yun calls “996” a “huge blessing” (福报), he rewards workers who work 996 and implies that their efforts and capabilities have earned them the right to work 996. This perspective is not shared universally.



Figure 4: One of the pictures included with Ma Yun's Weibo post

⁴⁴ Gerhard E. Lenski, *Power and privilege: A theory of social stratification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 74.

⁴⁵ Lenski, 75.

Public criticism has been growing ever since he publicly stated his supportive attitude towards “996” in his Weibo post. There are currently over 40,000 comments under his post. These comments sneer and complain, and rebuke Ma Yun that he has exposed himself as a cruel capitalist. The majority of comments reject Ma Yun’s idea that workers who are working 996 are appropriately rewarded and that they will not complain about 996 if they receive higher salaries and opportunities for promotion. Some comments link problems of work-life balance brought about by 996 with other social ills like the decrease in birth rates in contemporary China. One netizen commented that “what is betrayed by 996 is the respect of being a family member. How can a person sort out time to take care of their parents, husband, wife, or children if they get home at 9:00 pm every day? Perhaps they can commit more money to their family, but they lose the ability to care for their family. If the capitalists could lay aside their egos, I would say that what you did has led to the current Chinese social problems regarding more divorces, fewer marriages, and lower birth rates” (@Shi Yu Jia Jia).⁴⁶ Another comment touched on the problem of labor exploitation and the critique of capitalism by complaining that “cattle cultivate the land their whole lives without owning any piece of it” (@Ceng Yi Wo Tong Xing).⁴⁷ And there are other, similar comments like “I don’t know how many employees work overtime to make their boss the richest man” (@Liu Bian Shi De Yan

⁴⁶ Shuyujijia, April 12, 2019(07:01 a.m.), comment on Ma Yun.

⁴⁷ Cengyiwotongxing, April, 12, 2019(12:41 p.m.), comment on Ma Yun.

Hua)⁴⁸ and “capitalists are extending worker’s hours to gain surplus value” (@WTTTFWIDC).⁴⁹ These comments reveal that Ma’s words failed as a defense of 996, being regarded rather as “a toxic chicken soup” (毒鸡汤), a Chinese idiom that shares a similar meaning with “motivation porn,”⁵⁰ exposing the demotivational reality of 996.

To respond to widespread accusations of labor exploitation in the name of glorifying 996, Ma Yun wrote a second Weibo post the next day, clarifying that his statement was not “a defense of 996 but a show of respect to strivers (不为 996 辩护，而为奋斗者致敬)”. His response is as follows:

The true 996 is not simply about overtime, or manual labor, and it has nothing to do with exploitation... I think the true 996 is devoting time to learning, thinking, and self-upgrading. Those who are persistent in 996 are the people who find their passion and happiness beyond money. They enjoy their pathway of learning, thinking, and exploring. It is the people who find happiness in their work that own the blessing.⁵¹

In this clarification, Ma transforms 996 from a work schedule into an abstract approach to work in which is embedded the intrinsic merit of creativity and dedication that can eventually lead to individual success. To support his argument, Ma cited the example of national scientists who were committed to the Chinese national defense project “two bombs, one satellite” (两弹一星) in the 1950s and 60s, a technology and

⁴⁸ Liubiansgudeyanhua, April 12, 2019(06:28 a.m.), comment on Ma Yun.

⁴⁹ WTTTFWIDC, April 12, 2019(06:30 a.m.), comment on Ma Yun.

⁵⁰ “Toxic Chicken Soup, What?”, Best China Guide, March 9, 2019, <https://www.bestchinaguide.com/toxic-chicken-soup-what/>.

⁵¹ Yun Ma (@xiang cun jiao shi dai yan ren – ma yun), “再谈 996: 理性讨论比结论更重要, 周末愉快! (Re-discussing 996: a rational discussion is more important than a conclusion. Happy weekend!”, Weibo, April 13, 2019, <https://m.weibo.cn/2145291155/4360941451950470>

science plan that aimed to develop and design two types of bomb and one satellite in a reduced period with considerable contributions from the scientists involved. He argued that the time and energy contributed by national scientists were even more than “996” and that their efforts led to “the achievements of the whole country.” Again, Ma received thousands of critical responses from netizens for his exploitative rhetoric. Ma’s words reveal that the 996 work schedule and the culture of excessive work associated with it is intended to push employees to create more value for the development of the company and the individual.

Considering Ma’s social prestige as a leader in the development of Chinese Internet tech companies, his comments on and explanations of 996 have served as a rationale for excessive work hours in other tech companies and even private companies in other industries. This concern is supported by netizens’ comments under his two Weibo posts. Similar popular commentaries on online spaces regarding the 996 working schedule have been articulated by other business leaders. Liu Qiangdong, the founder of JD.com Inc., a major e-commerce company in China, does not directly express support for the 996 work schedule but has stated that JD.com is a workplace that rewards initiative and hard work, which is consistent with their entrepreneurial roots (Reuters).⁵² Such rhetoric suggests that he encourages the existence of a culture of excessive overtime. A female celebrity in Chinese entertainment industry, Su Mang, claimed during

⁵² Josh Horwitz and Brenda Goh, “China’s Jd.com Boss Criticizes ‘Slackers’ as Company Makes Cuts,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, April 13, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-jd-com-labour/chinas-jdcom-boss-criticizes-slackers-as-company-makes-cuts-idUSKCN1RP06D>.

a talk show that “younger generations’ complaints about the 996 work schedules and involution (*neijuan*, 内卷) [which I will analyze later as a negative phenomenon emerging from the unhealthily competitive environment in contemporary Chinese society] can be attributed to their high expectations and low efforts.” This prompted voices of resistance from Chinese netizens who denounced Su Mang’s claim and understood it as a trigger of anxieties rather than encouragement.⁵³ When “996” is transformed from a specific schedule into a work culture that values excessive work in the name of individual hard work and achievement, its relationship with labor is internalized and intensified in its modes of control and governance.

This can be seen in the self-narrations of employees who record self-made videos that they then upload onto video platforms such as YouTube and Bilibili, sharing their experiences of being a 996 employee or their understanding of the 996 work schedule. Many vlogs witness the reality of overtime work according to the stylistic conventions of such videos: “be ‘real’ and spontaneous, don’t edit, act, plan or plot, use titles, effects or change outfits, all stylistic conventions assumed to assert a real self.”⁵⁴ Some vlogs are presented in a “fancier” way that juxtaposes an excessive work routine with leisure time when they are in the workplace or at home . Such a representational conflict with the common critique of the 996 work schedule is understandable if we consider the

⁵³ “[初入职场的我] 苏芒提出了自己的看法: 内卷不是这个时代独有 ([For those of us who are new to the workplace] Su Mang offers his opinion: *neijuan* is not unique to this era)”, Bilibili, May 04, 2021, video, 01:34, <https://www.bilibili.com/s/video/BV1p84y1c77Y>.

⁵⁴ Aymar Jean Christian, "Real vlogs: The rules and meanings of online personal videos." *First Monday* (2009).

temporality of these “a day with me” vlogs.⁵⁵ Video makers who publish their work-life videos are temporarily working for their companies. However, most self-made videos are shot from a particular perspective, narrating the video maker’s experiences of working 996 and stating their reasons for resigning from these Internet tech companies. Many video makers describe how they endure 996 working schedule for the sake of future happiness in terms of an optimal material living standard. They describe how they feel exhausted by their work but that they are too wrapped up in it to have time to find another job.

By comparing these self-made videos and the speeches given by managers and CEOs, we are able to detect opposite expectations of work. Though one optimal consequence of the 996 schedule is a higher salary compared with other jobs, which is sometimes regarded as a justification and even described as a “huge blessing” to workers, the limited time left in a day and the inevitable limitations placed on workers’ potential capabilities for self-development overwhelms any potential promises concerning individual progress. This perverted relationship between expectation and reality means that “996,” which has been transformed from a specific work schedule into an entire culture of working, is not about increasing work efficiency, but about the exploitation of

⁵⁵ See, for example, *jienixuejieyoumianbao*(杰妮学姐有面包), “大厂日记: 运营岗位的一天, 和小姐姐们 996 干饭的日常(The diary of big industries: a day of the operation job position, and the dinner routine with my female workmates under the 996 working schedule)”, Bilibili, March 17, 2021, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1ny4y1E7B8?from=search&seid=7556585837314110892&spm_id_from=333.337.0.0.

labor, as Marx described in his theory of labor alienation. In light of this, “996” is not only a violation of Chinese employment laws, but a catalyst in the growth of the gap between the rich and the poor in Chinese society.

2.4 “Touching Fish” and “Lying Flat”: A Work Philosophy of Laziness or a New Movement of Resistance Against “996”?

As more exposes of “996” appeared before the public, disillusionment with the 996 work schedule, which was previously portrayed as a matter of higher wages and better engagement in work, has become apparent. Despite forms of direct resistance to 996 (described above), Chinese employees have found a milder way to resist the ceaseless and exhausting system of work initiated in online spaces. Whether to save the body on the verge of collapse, or to express the loss of enthusiasm for work after the abandonment of the self to it, or simply to find a balance between work and life, “touching fish” (*moyu* 摸鱼) and “lying flat” (*tangping* 躺平)” have emerged as necessary forms of action for workers who perceive their jobs as exhausting, whether or not they work a 996 work schedule.

Different from the migrant workers at the Sanhe job market in Shenzhen, who are well-known as a result of a documentary made about them by NHK, employees who pursue the principles of “touching fish” and “lying flat” have basically stable jobs with at

least basic salaries and social insurance.⁵⁶ Yet, they share with the migrant workers similar views on jobs in terms of work efficiency and motivation. To understand the logic behind these two “philosophies of work” that are adopted mainly by young people in China, it is important to introduce the specific contents and contexts of these two concepts.

First, touching fish refers to actions taken according to a series of tips for shirking during work. Tips include: “fill up a thermos with whisky, do planks or stretches in the work pantry at regular intervals, drink lots of water to prompt lots of trips to the toilet on work time and, once there, spend time on social media or playing games on your phone.”⁵⁷ The first traceable online post about how to effectively “touch fish” was made by an anonymous Weibo user named Massage Bear, who has come to be regarded as the founder of the online touching fish movement. Her tips on touching fish are widely supported by people who jokingly call themselves *da gong ren* 打工人, a Chinese term which is tantamount to workers, representing workers who make fun of their hard work status. For them, the touching fish philosophy of work provides reasonable grounds for taking breaks in their overloaded work routines and feeling good about not doing well. The term comes from a Chinese proverb, “troubled waters make it easier to catch fish” (

⁵⁶ “三和人才市场·中国日结百元的青年们 (Sanhe Human Resource Market: Chinese Young People Who Earn 1,500 yen a day),” NHK, May 11, 2018), video, 1:38:59, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcidomQ7rU>.

⁵⁷ Helen Davidson, “‘Touching Fish’ Craze Sees China’s Youth Find Ways to Laze amid ‘996’ Work Culture,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, January 22, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/22/touching-fish-craze-see-chinas-youth-find-ways-to-laze-amid-996-work-culture>.

浑水摸鱼), which means that it is possible to use a crisis or period of chaos for personal benefit.⁵⁸ In the period of COVID-19, touching fish emerges as pertinent to the current situation in the sense that the nationwide or global crisis has provided an environment in which it possible to slack off without punishment.

This seemingly opportunistic principle, embraced by a considerable number of people, is criticized by many as laziness and slacking off. However, from the perspective of the younger generation, it is a way of resisting the rampant 996 work culture. It is based on a shared realization that working hard will not lead to positive outcomes in terms of salaries or promotions. In light of this, touching fish promotes a form of “downward mobility” in which workers seek to focus on self-care instead of being manipulated, reflecting their real social immobility.

Lying flat shares the sense of immobility with touching fish. Different from downward mobility, lying flat highlights the value of maintaining the status quo of one’s life, or of refusing to participate in fierce competition with others or the struggle for success. Simply put, it calls on people “to do nothing, and that makes it everything.”⁵⁹ Different from touching fish, which is structured by a sense of entertainment, lying flat expresses a sense of nihilism that is drawn from the hopelessness of reality in terms of education, employment, marriage, and other aspects of life. In April 2021, the author of a

⁵⁸ Jane Li, “A Niche Chinese Gen Z Meme Is Ringing Alarm Bells for Beijing,” Quartz (Quartz, June 18, 2021), <https://qz.com/2019322/why-lying-flat-a-niche-chinese-millennial-meme-alarms-beijing/>.

⁵⁹ Siqu Ji and Huifeng He, “What Is ‘Lying Flat’, and Why Are Chinese Officials Standing up to It?,” South China Morning Post, October 24, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3153362/what-lying-flat-and-why-are-chinese-officials-standing-it>.

viral post, @Warm-hearted Traveller (@好心的旅行家), a user on the Baidu Tieba social media forum whose real name is Luo Huazhong, described his ethos of lying flat. Formerly a factory worker, Luo quit his job after he could no longer tolerate the endless work without rest. He described *lying flat* as a philosophy in these terms:

I have been unemployed for two years and just playing around. I don't feel that there's anything wrong with this. The pressures are mainly generated from comparisons made by my peers and the traditional mindset of the older generations, which are ubiquitous in your life. Every time you look at hashtags, they're about celebrity gossip news in terms of their relationships or pregnancy and the related topics of reproduction, which is just like some "unseen creature" that is forcing you to think certain thoughts. Humans don't need to be like this. I could sleep in my own wood bowie enjoying the sunshine like Diogenes, or contemplating "logos" in a cave like Heraclitus. If this is a land in which a trend of thought that highlights human subjectivity could never authentically exist, I can create it on my own. Lying flat is my sophistic movement. Humanity is the measure of everything, but only if it lies flat.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ The original post is deleted by Baidu. See the screenshot of Huazhong Luo (@haoxindelvxingjia)'s posts, from Gnews, May 27, 2021, <https://gnews.org/zh-hant/1275088/>. Translation made by author.



Figure 5: Luo Huazhong draws the curtains and crawls into bed. His gesture is a manifestation of “lying flat”

Luo Huazhong’s manifesto on the value of lying flat and his complaints about the pressures that are commonly experienced in Chinese society resonated with the public. When he found that his previous employment set too many restrictions and provided too few rewards, Luo quit his factory job and eventually found a more satisfying one: acting as a dead body in movies. As the 996 work schedule exhausts the motivation and enthusiasm of workers, many people, like Luo, embrace a low-desire and zero-pressure lifestyle, resisting long hours for low wages or striving for empty success. Confronting social judgment and the resulting stresses in all aspects of life—which is not limited to work and overtime work in any case—the ethos of lying flat offers a justification for people to take a break from a hyper-competitive lifestyle, or to choose another path to achieving individual happiness. In this sense, lying flat, as with touching fish, should not

be seen as laziness but as an indirect method of pushing back against the rampant culture of excessive work.

In a society permeated with the ethos of striving, lying flat is a form of rebellion that challenges mainstream values, which inevitably drew the attention of the state's censors. Eventually Luo's posts about lying flat were censored and then blocked by Baidu, which interpreted them as a reflection on the temporal stagnation of China's economic and as a challenge to the state's emphasis on striving (*fendou* 奋斗). Further, Xi Jinping's comments on lying flat, published under the title "Propel Common Prosperity," were reported on *Qiushi*, a state journal that serves as a flagship for the CCP's political theories and ideologies:

It is necessary to prevent the stagnation of social classes, to unblock the channels for upward social mobility, to create opportunities for more people to become rich, and to form an environment for improvement in which everyone participates, avoiding *neijuan* and lying flat.⁶¹

In its juxtaposition with the idea of "common prosperity," an egalitarian slogan proposed by the CCP as one of the fundamental principles of constructing a socialist society, lying flat reflects the reality that the gaps between social classes in China have become starker in recent years. Xi's comments triggered various interpretations that viewed them as either a warning about the prevalence of the ethos of lying flat or an optimal outcome of the movement itself. There is no doubt, though, that the ethos of

⁶¹ Xi Jinping, "扎实推动共同富裕(Promote common prosperity solidly)," *Qiushi*, October 15, 2021, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2021-10/15/c_1127959365.htm.

lying flat is not embraced by the state. Some commentators point out that laying flat is a challenge to the state's official discourse of rejuvenating the nation, that is, the project of the "Chinese Dream" which requires the contributions of every member of society to revitalize China's development in all respects. Other commentators suggest that lying flat is a sneering response to China's slowed-down rate of economic development, based on the idea that China's economic growth has already reached the peak of its developmental speed and that China is moving into a period of stagnation as a result of the rapid development of the processes of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. These diverse voices reveal the complex power relations that are at work behind the two grassroots movements, which involve the intersecting agencies of the state, companies, and individuals. The result of the integration socialism and capitalism, it seems, is individual suffering.

2.5 Conclusion

China is now in the process of shifting its paradigm of social development, and with this emerges the casualization of labor and increasing inequality in the distribution of social wealth and resources. The "new social demands" emerging from 996 workers reflect a fear of insecurity which is critically embedded in a loss of confidence in the future—workers put more effort into seeking inside information about a company's workstyle regarding work schedules in order to resist the inequality between companies and workers, as shown by the "996.ICU" and "Workers' Lives Matter" movements. As precarity is described by Anne Allison as a loss of attachment to form of employment

that “secures not only income and job but identity and lifestyle,”⁶² the paradigm of precarity and the precariat in China is experienced as a loss of connectedness which is localized as an intense detachment of work from identity in the context of 996 work culture. I argue that resistance to the 996 work schedule reveals not just the existence of precarity in China regarding work inequality and insecurity, but also a form of detachment from traditional norms of work and family which emphasized the value of collectivism, reflecting an intensification of precarity in the ways of growing up and developing in contemporary China.

⁶² Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press), 7.

3. Offline Problems of 996 Work Culture: Work-life Imbalance and *Neijuan*

3.1 Introduction and Methodology

Beyond online discussions, debates, and movements, we can also seek ways to narrate and analyze the 996 work schedule and work culture that are closer to the real work and lives of workers in the offline world, that is, the real workplaces where workers experiencing and interact with the 996 schedule, which is mainly concentrated on Chinese Internet tech companies in urban areas. If online platforms provide places to expose, complain about, and organize resistance to the 996 work schedule, it is more difficult for workers to directly violate and fight against this system of work in the offline world—they would almost certainly lose their jobs. What are workers' real statuses within the 996 system? How do workers interact with it in their daily work and lives? In addition, as the 996 schedule is adopted by Chinese companies in multiple industries engaged in diversified occupations and employing differentiated types of workers, such as interns, contract workers, and formal employees, discourses about the 996 schedule and its associated work culture are more complex and disorderly in the offline domain. Previous research, which focused on analyzing Chinese Internet content industries, mainly concerned internships, graduated students, and digital laborers, revealing the intertwined power relationships within and between Internet content companies and the

Chinese education system, as well as the poor working conditions (long working hours, unequal pay, frequent job-hopping, lay-offs, and insecurity after retirement).⁶³

A thorough description of this field, that would include other workers and other work problems, is yet to be completed. For example, one article described one major problem of the 996 schedule that occurs in the offline world—the everyday stress of tech workers in one specific area, work-life balance—in a critique of 996 released by an independent WeChat public account in February 2020.⁶⁴ As the article shows, the post describes a realistic scene that happens every day in the zones where Internet tech companies are concentrated in Beijing, in which a pair of children are taken by their grandparents to visit their parents during the limited time made available for dinner at work. By appropriating the term “left-behind children,” originally used to refer to the children of migrant workers who were left in the countryside and raised by their grandparents or their older relatives, the article describes a similar child-care dilemma with which workers at Internet tech companies and other workers who are trapped by the 996 schedule are currently confronted. According to the article, the phrase “left-behind children” is now applied to the children of tech workers who live in cities, as both their parents pursue careers in tech and work long and arduous hours. Since parents are not able to care for their children at home, they seek other resources, or are compelled to find

⁶³ Bingqing Xia. “Rethinking Digital Labour: A Renewed Critique Moving beyond the Exploitation Paradigm.” *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 32, no. 3 (September 2021): 311–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10353046211038396>.

⁶⁴ Jianhua Li, “‘互联网留守儿童’: 大厂员工的下一代(‘Internet Left-behind Children’: the Next Generation of Big Industries),” *DataVision*, February 86, 2021, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/4X6O7JNQJmizezP6fQNzgg>.

childcare facilities which charge expensive fees. Parents have to carefully arrange their time to fulfill both the requirements of work and the responsibilities of family life; they go to work before their children go to school and return home after their children go to sleep; extra working time on Saturday further reduces the time available for family activities, leaving little space for interactions between parents and children.

However, the appropriation of the term “left-behind children” to describe the children of tech workers conceals huge differences of social status in terms of income, occupation, and educational background between the two groups, migrant workers and tech workers. Thus, this description of left-behind children emphasizes the stress of parent’s work, but not merely in order to expose problems of child-care in the context of critiques of 996. In addition, we cannot ignore that the potential of this article to draw the eyes of the public by attaching the phrase “left-behind children” to the children of tech workers in China’s big tech industries may be overstated, since these children certainly enjoy far greater social privileges in terms of welfare and resources than the left-behind children living in rural areas. For example, Scott Rozelle and Natalie Hell speak to an urgent humanitarian concern for left-behind children who grow up with a low level of basic education rural areas and are exposed to an unhealthy environment.⁶⁵ But the article is useful because it allows us to describe the actual family situations of tech workers and

⁶⁵ Scott Rozelle and Natalie Hell, *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China’s Rise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 86.

provides vivid details about the lives of tech workers who become parents in a context of constant overwork.

Based on my curiosity to discover the actual reality of these “new left-behind children” and in order research the offline reality of 996, I conducted field research in Beijing and Shenzhen during the summer of 2021. Internet tech companies’ headquarters have clustered in metropolitan cities like Shenzhen and Beijing because of the benefits of metropolitan urban infrastructures. This is the main reason that I choose field sites in Beijing and Shenzhen. During the three months of my research, I interviewed six subject using a combination of in-person and online interviews. This was due to the practical limitations required by COVID-19, time conflicts, and their busy work schedules. My informants including tech workers who have children and those who do not. Of my six informants, one is male—he is the only male tech who accepted my request for interviews—and five are female. Their ages are between 30 and 35 and they have all acquired abundant experience in Internet tech companies. Due to their busy work schedules and the limited time available to see their children, I integrated both online and in-person interviews.

The small number of interviewees means that two limitations of my summer research results should be noted. First, all of my informants are migrants whose *hukou* was originally rural but who are now settled in Beijing or Shenzhen. Thus, my research does not include the stories of local people who are born in the metropolitan cities and who thus have access to greater levels of social welfare than migrants. Secondly, all my

informants' children are between 1 and 3 years old. This is partly due to the fact that younger tech workers match tech companies' employment requirements in China. When I asked my interviewees if they could recommend to me possible subjects who have school-aged children, one informant told me that it is rare to find tech workers who have older children working in a tech company that uses the "996" work schedule. She attributed this to the "young age" of Chinese Internet tech companies and the general youth of tech workers. Based on this reality, it is difficult to approach older tech workers whose children are also older. In addition, when I tried to investigate the situation of childcare facilities and other resources that working-class parents rely on to take care of their children, I was informed that their children were young enough that they could be looked after by grandparents, and thus that it was unnecessary to use expensive childcare institutions. Thus, my research does not address the situation in the childcare facilities that play an important role in the issue of "new left-behind children."

In this chapter, I will first describe some of the obstacles that workers face in trying to balance work and family. My research focuses on the relationship between family and work in the context of the form of labor exploitation driven by "996." By asking about my informants' strategies for seeing their children in their limited non-work time, listening to their opinions about overwork and "996," and asking about their expectations for their children's futures and their ideal work status, what became clear was the tension between the expectations they had about their work and the disappointment of the reality they are in. Pressure, anxiety, and hope are entangled in the

everyday lives of tech workers, as well as the workers who are subjected to “996” in other situations.

3.2 Oscillating between Work and Life: Transgenerational Child-care and Urban Life Anxieties

A documentary released by Tencent and BWM records the daily schedule of an employee at Tencent, a Chinese internet tech company: first, she leaves her home at around 6:00 am and drives to her place of work, which is ten kilometers away from her home; she focuses on work until nearly midnight, and then leaves to drive home, arriving at 1:00 am. The documentary does not show her personal life: the audience does not know if she lives alone or with her family until the next episode, which tells us that her daughter fell asleep in the bedroom after she finally came home; every work day, she barely saw her daughter.⁶⁶ The subject of the documentary is a departmental executive in Tencent, so she occupies a higher position than common workers, and the documentary, as well, is sponsored by Tencent. It is reasonable to imagine that the real situation of 996 workers in terms of work-life balance will be harder and more complicated than what is shown in the documentary.

One of my female informants, for example, Ms. Yue, who has a pair of twin boys, is also an executive at a large Internet tech company. Her colleague describes her as

⁶⁶ Chang Liu, “回响: 破局中的职场人(Echoes: The Breakthrough in the Workplace)”, Tencent, December 28, 2020, video, 17:22, http://m.v.qq.com/play/play.html?vid=z3216jk2m25&coverid=mzc00200y5sjgn7&columnid=89061&url_from=share&second_share=0&share_from=copy

having a “strong heart” and says that she handles her work and family issues well. As a migrant from a small city in Anhui province in southeast China, Yue and her husband have acquired a *hukou* registration in Beijing due to their jobs, which provides their family with basically equal residence rights (such as the right to purchase real estate and health insurance), but their children cannot go to public school because their *hukou* registration is dependent on the company. In order to reduce the amount of time spent on transportation so that she would have more time to see her children, she has moved three times in five years, each time closer to her company’s location. Now she can return home to have lunch with her sons. However, housing prices are very high in Beijing, taking up a substantial amount of her earnings. Further, reducing the distance between home and work does not completely compensate for other limitations. When Yue’s sons were born, she hired a nanny for basic childcare like cooking or picking children up from activities; however, that was not expedient for her and her husband because they don’t “feel safe with a stranger,” as Yue told me, and hiring a nanny is expensive considering their housing mortgage. Finally, she reached out to her father who moved from his hometown to Beijing to take care of his grandsons. Then the problem became who would take them to and pick them up from kindergarten. As Yue explained, official departments and relevant institutions in Beijing do not effectively support working-class parents, since public kindergartens in Beijing currently require parents to take children home at 4:00 pm, which is an unreasonable time considering the fact that working-class parents are generally still at work at that time. Private kindergartens may seem like a good choice

because of their flexible schedules, but tuition at private kindergartens in Beijing are far higher. As Yue said:

Let me tell you! The government doesn't care about us at all! How can you tell a parent to pick their children up at 4:00pm? They must be kidding! Don't they work at that time? I can't just leave my workplace! That's usually a time for conferences. I know my home is close to my sons' school, but how am I supposed to not worry about their safety? Sometimes my husband or I will send them to school when we are available, but my father usually sends them and then picks them up. That's what most people do. You'll see a group of grandfathers or grandmothers waiting for the children in front of the gate.⁶⁷

Like Yue, other informants expressed their anxieties about their children's schooling too. Although most of my informants' children are pre-kindergarten age, their concerns are similar with respect to the expensive tuition of private schools in metropolitan cities and the ways in which school times and their work schedules don't match up. Such time conflicts are common in non-996 working-class families as well, but what distinguishes 996 parents is their lack of Saturdays off within the 996 work schedule—their schedule severely limits the time available for family activities and adequate child-care. Further, the limited time available for rest distracts their attention from their children, because they can only rest on Sundays. In this sense, the 996 schedule may weaken family bonds and even contribute to family conflict.

This concern is based on the example of my male informant, Mr. Ming. He came to Shenzhen from a small northern village after graduating with an associate bachelor's degree, and then obtained his first job in an Internet tech company in Shenzhen after he

⁶⁷ Interviewed by author in Chinese. Translation made by author.

learned the coding and other skills relevant to product operation, such as user-centered design. After acquiring household registration in Shenzhen, he married his wife and used his resources to help her obtain a job in another Internet tech company. Then they bought a luxury apartment in Shenzhen and switched employers to another famous Internet tech company. After they had a daughter, his wife brought her mother to Shenzhen for child-care. However, due to the limitations entailed by the household registration system, the grandmother did not have access to full resident rights in Shenzhen, including the most significant right for elderly people, medical insurance. Also, unfamiliar with the lifestyle of Shenzhen, a southern city which is very different than her hometown in northern China, the grandmother found multiple aspects of life difficult, such as language barriers and eating habits. As problems accumulated and the grandmother was unable get used to her new life here, Ming's wife began to complain about his inadequate care and attention to their children and the entire family. Ming told me that he has tried to compensate for the lack of time spent with his family by earning more money, but his wife doesn't understand, so he will sometimes choose to go on business trips to other cities "just to escape (from the family) a little while." Ming's story reveals a fairly typical problem of family responsibility among working-class parents in urban China, and one which does not just occur in the context of the 996 work schedule. One study finds that in the process of urbanization migrant family child-care arrangements are transformed from a gender-based system to a generation-based system. However, this produces two major problems: first, it results in inadequate care and social support for grandparents, which increases

their health risks and is detrimental to their mental well-being; second, while working fathers fit with prevailing urban norms of efficiency and diligence, employed mothers feel guilty for their inadequate child-care.⁶⁸ In the context of the 996 work schedule, such gender divisions and differences of feeling and behavior in child-care contribute to gender inequality in the workplace, a phenomenon that researchers have called “motherhood penalties”.⁶⁹

Gender inequality is deeply rooted in the discourse of “new left-behind children.” Caitlyn Collins has shown how gendered cultural schemas and policy frameworks shaped the lived experiences of employed, middle-class mothers in four field sites in Germany, the US, Sweden, and Italy.⁷⁰ Collins argues for “a politics of work-family justice” and policies that enable individuals to participate fully in both paid work and family care across lines of race, class, and national status.⁷¹ The six families I interviewed share the feature that mothers, rather than fathers, are the ones to make sacrifices in terms of employment in terms of necessary child-care. One of my informants explained her sense of work insecurity to me by citing the statistical “M”-model, which predicts the career development trajectories of female employees. The nadir period will occur in a female

⁶⁸ Haijing Dai. “Embracing Urbanity: Child Care Arrangements and Motherhood Anxiety in China’s Urban Transition.” *Journal of Family Issues* 40, no. 17 (December 2019): 2389–2411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19856659>.

⁶⁹ Menghan Zhao, “From Motherhood Premium to Motherhood Penalty? Heterogeneous Effects of Motherhood Stages on Women’s Economic Outcomes in Urban China - Population Research and Policy Review,” SpringerLink (Springer Netherlands, September 17, 2018), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11113-018-9494-0>.

⁷⁰ Caitlyn Collins, *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁷¹ Collins, 10.

employee's middle age, suggesting that she will be faced with a career crisis such as stagnation in promotions or even involuntarily termination. Such work insecurities reflect the idea that conflicts between work and family responsibilities are intensified by an excessive work schedule, resulting in inefficiencies. As my informants told me, employed mothers of young children cannot concentrate on work at night because they are in a state of constant distraction. They have rights to maternal leave from the workplace, but they feel too guilty to leave emerging work responsibilities to others. In turns, if they leave work to take care of children at home, they potentially lose chances for promotions or wage increases due to the hyper-competitiveness of tech companies. In these ways, employees come to be trapped by the 996 schedule—they become unwilling to get married and have children. The gender inequality embedded in the culture of 996 work and the new “left-behind children” is not only a problem of gender bias but also a contributing factor to problems of work efficiency and social reproduction.

3.3 The Suspended Present and the Promised Future

When the question of work-life balance in the context of excessive working time arises, questions like the following arise: Why do these parents not choose other, less restrictive jobs? Is it not common for wage-earning class parents to have no time to take care of their children? What makes the 996 working parents special? In the offline world, unlike in the online discussion of 996 work culture, what we see is a general acceptance of 996 work culture and even a set of discussions about how to utilize this culture of overwork to maximize one's self-interest and profits.

In a self-ethnography of life in Chinese Internet content companies, Bingqing Xia points out that the promise of a creative work culture is one of the mechanisms behind the work schedule and explains workers' motivations in accepting it.⁷² Along one dimension, Internet tech companies provide a flexible work schedule that means that workers can be flexible in choosing their commuting times. While still basically following the 996 schedule, this means that if a worker works overtime until 10:00pm one day, they can choose to go to work at 10:00 am the next day. Along another dimension, tech companies promise a creative working environment that welcomes open-minded ideas and thought and encourages employees to design creative products. This is enthusiastically embraced by workers who can thus create and achieve fulfillment in their work. In this sense, the 996 schedule matches with workers' values about their work and their individual development, and this can be more important than the higher salaries and better social welfare services that are available with a metropolitan *hukou* and the associated social priorities. However, these promised advantages are difficult to put into practice in reality, which creates problems like gender inequality, as I discussed. However, what is really reflected here is a conflict between the present and the future.

In the case of the new “left-behind children,” especially, parents are acutely aware of their limited time and ability to care for their children. My interviewees confess that “I have no time to spend with my daughter, so there is no way to talk about how to educate

⁷² Bingqing Xia, 依码为梦: 中国互联网从业者生产实践报告(Code for Dreams: A Report on the Production Practices of Chinese Internet Practitioners), (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Science Press, 2021).

her,” or other “I have to go to work or my children will have no tuition to go to school.” Their confessions are filled with the sense of helplessness that comes with trying to make the best choices when all the choices are bad. When I asked how they felt about missing so much of their children’s childhood, I received answers like “I’ll make it up it when I find the time to change my job,” or “I can use the money I earn to support my kid’s life and they will understand when they grow up.” These answers show that they are working for the future by enduring and accepting the problematic present.

Here, I would like to introduce Xiang Biao’s discussion of the idea of “suspension,” from the Chinese term *xuanfu* (悬浮), which is widely used by people in China to describe their problematic life experiences. Connected with the mobilities of Chinese migrant workers, “suspension” describes the dynamic work status of workers who “move frequently, conduct intensive labor, and pause routine life” as a way of temporarily accumulating money before then quickly moving on from the work.⁷³ Xiang conceptualizes suspension as a condition of being that problematizes the present but that simultaneously envisions a future that is different from the present. In this sense, the present is “suspended” and then floats with no grounding because it is instrumentalized to achieve a future filled with promises and expectation. In the case of 996, people who choose to work within that regime are aware of the fact that they work extremely hard in order to achieve salaries that are much higher than average, in order to use the money to

⁷³ Biao Xiang, “Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World,” *Pacific Affairs* 94, no. 2 (January 2021): 233, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2021942233>.

fulfill their authentic interests, and in order to escape their smaller hometowns to become a formal resident of a metropolitan city, with all the convenience and social services that that entails. As Xiang argues, “People keep moving but fail to critically engage in the present”; temporary problems are thus suspended, neglected, and even endured.⁷⁴ However, how can a future of happiness and better living conditions be approached if it bears the weight of unresolved problems? In other words, if people accept and endure overtime work to acquire benefits like work experience and savings, how do they imagine that they can avoid the same thing in their next job? It is not a question here of individual’s choices or preferences but one of structural characteristics of the system of employment and society in China.

3.4 Escaping from Neijuan: Other 996 Work Cultures

The 996 work schedule is not solely defined by the downsides of poor employment conditions and exploitation. When Ma Yun explained and supported the practice of the 996 schedule by giving the examples of artists and scientists, this is worth acknowledging. Work that involves a person’s passions and interests is worth putting more time and energy into to facilitate its achievement.

One of my informants, Li, quit her high-salary and promising job in one giant Internet tech company in Beijing in order to return her life to a condition that better fit her expectations. The first time I met Li was in a coffee bar near her neighborhood in a

⁷⁴ Xiang, 237.

suburb of Beijing. Before we met in person, she communicated with me on WeChat and introduced me to her basic work-life situation: she hadn't found formal work since quitting her previous company, but her husband was still working in a tech company which used the 996 schedule. After I expressed a strong willingness to meet her in person, she accepted my request without hesitation. The first thing she said to me was "This is the same place where I met a job hunter two weeks ago". She told me that she quit her job because she was desperately disappointed with it, and that now she was "an almost full-time mother" who took care of her one-year-old daughter together with her mother and her father-in-law. She then explained to me that by saying she was "an almost full-time mother," she meant that she was not putting all of her time and energy into child-care; she was also involved in her residential community's theatre as a part-time amateur actor, because she had been passionate about acting and performing since she was in college. Li's first thoughts of quitting her job were aroused by the miserable story of Wei Zexi, a college student who died after receiving an experimental treatment for synovial sarcoma at a hospital he learned about through the recommended results from a particular Chinese search engine. It was actually commercial advertisement. At the time, Li belonged to a team in charge of a project that was related to Wei Zexi's search results. Though there was no direct relationship between her work and the miserable accident, the tragedy led her to doubt the meaning of work. Her formal proposal to leave the company was directly related to health problems she was experiencing, both physical and mental. She often felt inexplicable pains in her back and she was later diagnosed with a spinal

deformity resulting from long hours sitting in her workplace. Meanwhile, the overtime work and intense workloads pressed on her, causing severe hair loss and emotional instability. After negotiating with her husband about it, she eventually submitted her resignation, even though her manager informed her of an opportunity for promotion at the end of the year. When I asked Li whether she planned to go back to the company, she hesitated and then said that she was afraid that the intense work schedule and workload would consume all of her time and that she would thus have no time to take care of her children, though she was still attracted by the high salaries. She also explained that the high-speed workstyle in Internet tech companies meant that they could not guarantee a stable employment status, which meant that her position could be taken by other candidates at any time. For her future career plan, she hopes to find a job that will not take all of her time away from fulfilling family responsibilities and allow her to continue performing in theatre.

Li's dynamic perceptions and expectations of her job in the Internet tech company is an exception to what Xiang describes as the homogeneity of contemporary Chinese society. Li chooses her hobbies and dreams over a job with a high salary and good reputation. I understand this redistribution of hopes and efforts, generally missing in Chinese society, as an alternative to what Xiang claims is a homogeneity of people's directions and destinations of future development. As Xiang notes in an interview, the problem of differentiation is one reason for the emergence of *neijuan*, which is dominant in Chinese society: "one of the important prerequisites of *neijuan* we've been discussing

today is non-differentiation: everyone is focused on and living for the same goals. Otherwise, if you're unhappy at work, you could go do something else like open a noodle restaurant. But no, everyone is propelled to go down the same path.”⁷⁵

The result of homogeneity is intensified competition throughout the whole society. What is worse, the formation of a kind of loop excludes people who are perceived as uncompetitive and unqualified, which raises the level of standards but simultaneously widens the gap between social classes. In this sense, the exploitation of labor entailed by the 996 schedule is perceived as a major element of “platform capitalism,” revealing the intensified competition between giant digital platform companies who pursue capital accumulation using “data” as the raw material. Miserably, competition between workers who are trapped by the 996 schedule appear to lead to expectations of mobility brought about by good work. This leads to a greater and greater division between the rich and the poor. The gap between *manong* (tech workers, 码农) and Ma Yun gets larger and larger. This dichotomy should be situated in a discussion of the mobility and immobility of work in the context of *neijuan*.

3.5 Re-narrating Neijuan

The Chinese government officially began investigating “996” in Chinese Internet tech companies like Tencent, Bytendance, and Alibaba in the middle of August 2021.

⁷⁵ Qianni Wang and Shifan Ge, “How One Obscure Word Capture Urban China’s Unhappiness: Anthropologist Xiao Biao explains why the academic concept of ‘involution’ became a social media buzzword”, interviewed by *Sixth Tone*, November 04, 2020, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006391/how-one-obscure-word-captures-urban-chinas-unhappiness>.

Many employees, however, strongly objected to the cancellation of the 996 work schedule. In an anonymous poll conducted by Bytedance, nearly 50% of employees rejected canceling the 996 system.⁷⁶ This is a manifestation of the problematic endurance of “996.” Therefore, we should ask: What are the social realities that prompt people to chase after the future while neglecting the present? It is necessary here to review the concept of *neijuan*, which is related to the toxic competitiveness of labor markets in China and structural problems in contemporary China’s mode of social development.

As Xiang argues, *neijuan* originally corresponded to *involution*, a term used by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1963) with reference to Indonesia’s agricultural system to describe a self-perpetuating process that prevents agrarian societies from developing. Its first use to describe China’s situation came with the work of Philip C.C. Huang, who incorporated *involution* in his explanation of the decline of marginal productivity of agrarian labor which he attributed to the conflict between a growing population and decreasing available land.⁷⁷ In contemporary China, *neijuan*’s meaning is rather different than how these scholars used the term, but it still expresses the sense of “lacking significant progress and coming up to a dead end,” as Xiang says, which refers to a model in which a culture develops to a definite stage but then fails to transform itself into a new and more advanced form, causing internal complications and an intensification

⁷⁶ Zhuqi Zhou, “腾讯试点取消 ‘996’ 后, 字节跳动也要跟上?(After Tencent’s pilot elimination of ‘996’, will Bytedance follow?)”, *Sina*, June 22, 2021, <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-06-22/doc-ikqciyzk1172435.shtml>.

⁷⁷ Xiang Biao, “How One Obscure Word Capture Urban China’s Unhappiness” interviewed by *Sixth Tone*, November 04, 2020, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006391/how-one-obscure-word-captures-urban-chinas-unhappiness>.

of conflict and competition.⁷⁸ Similarly, the emerging tendencies of touching fish and lying flat occur in the context of *neijuan*, which transforms the latter into a term that is widely appropriated and discussed by people who experience constant anxiety about their life conditions and the competition they experience in every aspect of their lives. In the process of its popularization, the original meaning of *neijuan*, which describes a specific mode of introverted development, is broadened in the new context of Chinese frustrations and anxieties in the spaces (the education system, the labor market) that define particular stages of life.

Though the prevalence of its application to Chinese society, *neijuan* and the anxiety that comes with it are manifestations of people's expectations and aspirations to upward mobility. As Xiang notes, the state of suspension is "a crystallized consciousness with which the public problematize their experience."⁷⁹ *Neijuan* shares features with the consciousness of suspension, in that people recognize and criticize their problematic state of being. It includes but is not limited to issues of employment. Similar to suspension, *neijuan* is a kind of perception in which people are confused about "where to stop" and "when to stop."⁸⁰ I understand such aimlessness along two dimensions. First, at the level of the individual's, *neijuan* refers to people's participation in collective developments but it is focused on self-promotion and ends up with self-flagellation. As one major manifestation of *neijuan* which permeates every aspect of Chinese society, hyper-

⁷⁸ See note 71 above.

⁷⁹ Xiang, 233.

⁸⁰ Xiang, 242.

competitiveness, for example, reveals people's intentional or unintentional consciousness of surpassing others, and this in turn fuels anxieties such as the ones I described in the case of working class workers who are trapped by the 996 schedule. Second, at the level of the public's, the structural problems associated with "development for the sake of development"⁸¹ result in an inescapable loop of obscuring the measurement of progress. As Xiang aptly puts it, the term's complex development refers to a process of development which is "about staying afloat, preserving the status quo, and persevering despite multiple problems." More importantly, it has "problematic effects on ordinary citizens."⁸² As Xiang points out, one key feature of East Asian processes of complex development is the dominant role of state intervention and social norms. In view of this, the public discourse of *neijuan* is juxtaposed to the dominance, intervention, and influence of the state, revealing structural problems that shape people's status of being or feeling *neijuan*.

In the context of 996 work culture, I understand *neijuan* as revealing both people's aspirations of mobility and the frustrations of immobility. Workers work overtime, working-class parents lack adequate time for taking care of their children, and tech workers are trapped in insecure employment, which is even worse for female workers. All of these problematic temporalities are endured by people who believe that in the future they will achieve an optimal status of being: a higher standard of living, a good

⁸¹ Xiang, 243.

⁸² Xiang, 244.

life, a good job with decent hours and tolerable intensity. It is this belief that leads workers who are in precarious employment to accept their condition and even live with it. This is cruel optimism, as Lauren Berlant writes: “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”⁸³ The 996 schedule is a mark of a problematic present in the contemporary Chinese employment environment, which is filled with promises, possibilities, future aspirations, and, even more critically, optimism. Berlant argues that optimism can be cruel “when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving.”⁸⁴ Parla describes Berlant’s optimism as a way “to hang on to a sense of continuity in the world. But it always harbors a potential for cruelty: the structural relation that optimism makes possible between the subject and a whole series of substitutive objects that promise wholeness is a relation that is bound to fall short: the promise of wholeness is an impossible one because the promise is trying to compensate for the loss of something that never existed in the first place but gave rise to the desire through its lack.”⁸⁵ It is this optimism, which indicates a problematic temporality that detaches a desirable future from an unavoidable but precarious present, that is embedded in the concept of *neijuan* in the context of the 996 work schedule. In this light, workers are trapped in the system of the 996 working schedule. They are aware of the problematic

⁸³ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 1.

⁸⁴ Berlant, 2.

⁸⁵ Ayşe Parla, *Prekarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 7.

structure of their work, but they expect to acquire the promises associated with it—urban *hukou* registration with better access to social welfare, higher salaries that promise a good life—by accepting and living with problems which actually render them immobile.

3.6 Conclusion

Compared to the passionate discussions of the 996 schedule or 996 work culture that occur online, 996 work culture in the offline world is deeply interconnected with workers' everyday stresses, which mainly take the form of work-life conflicts, work-family imbalance, and hyper-competitiveness. What the notion of *neijuan* reveals is the presence of a bottleneck in China's process of general social development, – The entire society is searching for a breakthrough to move beyond its temporal stagnation. *Neijuan* is a general status that is produced by a rapidly changing society, and the form of agency associated with it is connected with a broader structure. As the mainstream value of striving for a better future pervades every individual, the positions and rights of different agencies—the Chinese state, companies, and the people—are ordered disproportionately. It is the individual that is compelled to comply with the framework established by the Chinese state and companies.

4. Conclusion

As the 996 work schedule has spread through contemporary China's working environment, it has been transformed into a culture of work that goes beyond a worker's job and is intertwined with every aspect of life. First implemented in Huawei, 996 work culture was born alongside the ongoing transformation of China's mode of development—from a labor-intensive mode to technology- and innovation-driven one—as a way to move past a stagnation of development, mainly in economic terms. However, in the process of achieving more advanced development and more thorough transformation, labor remains the major resource that the state relies on, resulting in social-scaled fast-paced development in terms of companies and individuals. “996” is a product and a manifestation of a contradiction between the spirit of *striving* and the inevitable exploitation of labor that results. 996 work culture cannot simply be seen as completely unreasonable, since it is truly embraced by many employees.

In this thesis, I have attempted to describe Chinese 996 work culture in a more comprehensive way that takes diverse voices and positions seriously. From the perspective of online life, workers engage in resisting the 996 schedule by posting first-hand experiences on social-media, gathering collective capacities to record lists of companies that violate Chinese labor laws, or supporting other behaviors, like lying flat and touching fish, that oppose the unequal relationship between work effort and profits from work. I argue that although strict censorship in China limits people's anti-996 protests in their real workplaces, online spaces provide relatively safe and efficient

platforms for workers to protest injustices of work and to fight for their rights. As one of a number of online collective movements, 996 workers can be viewed as a new, emerging precariat class, in the sense that they have developed similar class identities and have organized around similar demands. The case of 996 workers' online movements may also contribute to understanding broader discourses of the precariat in the context of global precariousness. Compared with other kinds of labor, 996 workers and their new social demands—workers in Chinese Internet companies with relatively salaries and relatively good access to social welfare—embody the intensification of precarity in contemporary China.

From the perspective of offline life, workers' interactions with the 996 schedule further manifests their contradictory perceptions of work and the future of work. For working-class parents, the extra money provided by the 996 schedule (although "overtime pay" is still inadequate and is often withheld by employers) and the mobility that their hard work is supposed to enable (urban *hukou* registration, access to social welfare) promise a better future for themselves, their children, and their parents. However, such promises of mobility produce real immobility, which is embodied in their suspended present and endlessly deferred future. By incorporating Xiang Biao's discussion of "suspension" and Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism," I argue that *neijuan*, one of the most widespread concerns and conundrums among Chinese people, is also a manifestation of the fact that people are compelled to accept a problematic present in order to achieve a promised future. However, that future is also problematic because it is

built on existing and unresolved problems of the present, and on an optimistic imagination which is unrelated to that present.

As a result of intervention by Chinese state into the question of the 996 schedule, many companies have changed their work-time regimes. Will the 996 schedule disappear from an employment environment structured by precarity, though? I think the answer is yes, since “996” is, in a way, only a symbolic example of a particular kind of problem related to work. In fact, beyond “996,” there are also other contentious work schedules implemented by Chinese Internet tech companies, such as “007,” which describes a system of working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.⁸⁶ The existence of work schedules like this is an indication of structural social problems. It is not simply a question of individual choices. Future research on inequality in Chinese workplaces should explore further the arrangement and distribution of power between the state, companies, and individuals.

⁸⁶ Yuxuan Li, “‘996、007’背后的辛酸：真的回不到八小时工作制了吗？(The Bitterness behind ‘996 and 007’: Is It Really Impossible to Go Back to the Eight-Hour Workday?)”, NetEase, January 19, 2021, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/G0NG79CD0543QP26.html>.

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