

Surviving 996

by [Sunny Qi](#)

The days leading up to China's most important holiday, Chinese New Year, are always greeted with festivities, celebration, and excitement. However, in 2021, they marked a string of tragedies for tech workers in China. At 1:30 a.m. on February 1, a twenty-two-year-old employee heading home from work at e-commerce giant Pinduoduo collapsed to the ground; she died hours later (Wang). Less than two weeks later, another Pinduoduo employee committed suicide when visiting his parents. Just one day after that, a deliveryman for a different tech company set himself on fire in protest of not getting paid, yelling "I want my blood and sweat money" (Wang).

According to the World Health Organization, in 2016 there were 745,000 deaths globally that were attributed to stroke and ischemic heart disease brought on by long working hours ("Long Working Hours"). Yet, even in the face of these worker deaths, tech company executives continue to push for longer work hours. One famous practice called 996, which has been personally endorsed by Jack Ma, the founder of China's biggest e-commerce company Alibaba, calls for employees to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week (Bandurski). At the same time, workers have begun protesting to advocate for their own health and welfare, sparking a national conversation about the future of work in China, a conversation that has caught the attention of the highest levels of government.

China endures significantly greater work hours compared to Western countries like the US. For instance, in 2021 the average work week in China was 46.1 hours, more than ten hours longer than the US average work week of 34.7 hours ("20 Countries With the Highest Average"; "Average Weekly Working Hours"). Other Western countries like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand enjoy even lower hours, working an average of 32.2, 32.29, and 33 hours per week respectively in 2021 ("20 Countries With the Lowest Average"). Even so, 46.1 hours doesn't come close to the 72-hour work week that a 996 schedule encourages. But what makes China's situation especially interesting is the incredible level of protest and backlash in response to current labor conditions.

The first such protest movement to appear was 996.ICU, which began in 2019. The "ICU" in the name 996.ICU references the health problems that tech employees might face due to overwork through 996 and the resulting likelihood of ending up in an intensive care unit (Li 54). After this movement came Tang Ping, or "lying flat," which was started by Luo Huazhong's 2021 Chinese social media blog post titled "Lying Flat is Justice" (Chen). In it, he argued that the stress and pressures of work are unnecessary

and that one can find satisfaction in refusing work entirely, behaving like “Diogenes, who sleeps in his own barrel taking in the sun” (Huazhong qtd. in Bandurski). The post became wildly popular, and just as fast as it gained prominence in the public eye, it was censored by the Chinese government, who – fearing that the movement would reduce worker productivity and economic growth – banned users from using ‘lying-flatism’ as a search term and removed products that were branded with the phrase ‘lying down’ on e-commerce websites (Song). The most recent movement, which emerged around 2022, is called Bai Lan, which means “let it rot.” In it, young people who have become disillusioned by the possibility of social and economic mobility through hard work instead do the bare minimum at work, with the goal of remaining employed rather than gaining promotions (Ni).

The fact that people are willing to be so vocal about these labor issues, despite the threat of the authoritarian Chinese government cracking down and even punishing them for dissent, shows the magnitude of the labor issues facing Chinese tech companies. Interestingly, even though the Chinese government censored mentions of Tang Ping, it has also cracked down on companies for harmful labor practices, including a ruling by China’s Supreme People’s Court that declared 996 illegal – although it remains unclear whether this ruling will be enforced (Zhang). These events raise the question: why is China specifically afflicted with such long working hours, and what do the responses of workers, companies, and the Chinese government reveal about the actual causes of the overworking problem?

Since working hours are set by Chinese companies, it is useful to analyze their arguments for longer working hours. These arguments suggest that Chinese tech executives believe workers desire money first and foremost. For instance, in response to the backlash against his endorsement of 996, Jack Ma stated that employees should want to provide more for their parents and children, and the only way to provide more “blessings” is to work 996 (Ma). Zhou Hongyi, the CEO of cybersecurity company Qihoo 360, theorized that his company should make employees active shareholders so that they “feel like they are working for themselves,” at which point “they won’t mind the 996 schedules” (Zuo). Jack Ma appeals to workers’ desire to provide for their families, while Zhou Hongyi claims that workers will become motivated once they directly benefit from the economic growth of the company.

Despite their condescending tone, the rhetoric of these tech CEOs sounds quite reasonable. The desire to pay back one’s parents is a sentiment shared by most people, and having an active stake in a company in the form of shares gives employees more power and say in their respective companies.

However, it’s exactly this thought process that these executives are trying to exploit. In David Graeber’s essay “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs,” he discusses the

perplexing idea that, despite advances in technology, the demand for labor has seemed to stay constant, and even increase. He cites John Maynard Keynes, the prominent economist who predicted that technological advancements would give countries like “Great Britain or the United States” a “15-hour work week,” as robots and machines would reduce the need for manual labor (Graeber). This prophecy may seem untrue, as people today often work many more hours, but Graeber claims that many workers with 40-50-hour work weeks really only work fifteen hours and spend the remaining time “updating their Facebook profiles or downloading TV box-sets” (Graeber). But why pay workers for more hours than they are needed? According to Graeber, the ruling class inflicts unnecessary work hours to prevent “a happy and productive population with free time on their hands,” which it views as a “mortal danger.” This motivation is compounded by the ideology that hard work is a positive trait, and that “anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing” (Graeber).

This moral conception that hard work is a self-standing good is exactly what Chinese tech weaponizes to promote company loyalty, since it makes employees feel compelled to work hard or risk facing disgrace. Jack Ma’s call for employees to do more for their families indirectly touches upon that moral, essentially saying employees should work harder for the sake of their families. Zhou Hongyi’s idea to give employees a stake in the company might just be a tactic to bolster employee loyalty by tying the success of the company to them, burdening employees with the responsibility of a self-employed worker without actually giving them that autonomy. Even worse, long work hours might distract employees from protesting against these same unfair practices. Nobody will have the energy to fight against long working hours when they are already exhausted by those very hours. That might be why these employee movements are so much more passive than active in nature. It’s far easier to quit and ‘lie flat’ than to actively protest. The Chinese government also benefits from this prospect of prosperity through hard work, since long hours will distract citizens from engaging in other political issues.

At least that’s what tech executives and the Chinese government might believe. While these ideas might have been held in the past, today many workers are no longer content with the supposed ethic of hard work, and many, to the dismay of tech CEOs, are calling it out. For instance, in his blog post, which inspired the ‘lying flat’ movement, Luo Huazhong indicates that he gave up work because of this work ethic’s stress (Bandurski). Moreover, by citing Diogenes as a role model, he suggests he has little desire for money, as Diogenes himself gave up nearly all material possessions. An anonymous user with the username ‘stupidcan123’ on Weibo, China’s version of Twitter, also criticized Jack Ma, asking him “Did you ever think about the elderly at home who need care, the children who need company?” The user added that nobody will have children anymore because the 996 schedule makes it impossible for parents to take care of them (Wang and Shane). Jack Ma was correct in assuming that people care

for the welfare of their families. However, in the workers' eyes, providing for one's family is a combination of both financial support and emotional commitment to familial relationships. Thus, workers are not against the idea of making money for their families, but they are against the idea of making money at the cost of spending time with them. Additionally, in an interview with CNA Insider, Li Xiaolin, a vehicle inspection mechanic, described how he had delayed his work and asked his boss to pass work to other employees so that he only worked when absolutely necessary. He explained that he viewed work as "mundane and boring," and though he tried working hard in the past, he felt it was ultimately "not worth it" ("The 'Bai Lan' Movement"). Li Xiaolin's attitude shows that work satisfaction does not equate to working long hours, an idea that Chinese companies rarely seem to consider.

But while Chinese companies have mostly ignored these concerns, the government has kept a close eye on worker movements. As previously mentioned, the Chinese government's position is a confusing one, simultaneously censoring the 'lying flat' movement while declaring 996 illegal. This confusing dynamic is clarified in an article by Shuxia Ji, a journalist who works for a news outlet sponsored by the Chinese government. In her article, she provides insightful reasoning that the recent wealth increase in China has allowed families to slow the pace of their lives, which allows people to 'lie flat.' She actually argues that this lifestyle should be respected, but adds that its adherents need to be guided toward better work ethics and that fair market environments should be cultivated to reward hard work. Toward her conclusion, she appeals to the goals of the nation, stating that the issue of 'lying flat' needs to be addressed as China navigates the problems of an aging population, explaining that the younger generations are critical to China's economic progress.

Ji's article reflects the Chinese government's main focus: order and prosperity. The author's stance is very supportive and understanding as she defends the action of 'lying flat,' saying that 'lying flat' is a symptom of an unfair market rather than a problem with workers themselves. Obviously, however, the fact that the Chinese government has censored the 'lying flat' movement indicates that they don't genuinely support it. The intention of this supportive tone is to instead calm frustrated workers, convince them that the government is on their side, and encourage them to work harder through the appeal that they, the younger generations, are vital to China and its economic progress. This rhetoric brings order by redirecting blame away from the Chinese government and reducing the possibility of protests. The article also shows the Chinese government's focus on economic prosperity, as the author repeatedly emphasizes the importance of economic development, positing that China's "adoption of policies such as encouraging innovation . . . are important ways to promote economic transformation . . . while providing people with more jobs and opportunities for success" (Ji). Because China is an authoritarian government, its promise to bring prosperity to the people is binding. If a democratically elected government is unpopular, it gets voted out, whereas an authoritarian government must be overthrown, often violently. Thus, the article

emphasizes the idea of bringing jobs to the people because that's how the Chinese government has maintained its legitimacy to this day. As economist John West explains, "The [Chinese] Communist Party government has retained a monopoly on power. In return, it has delivered unprecedented economic growth and poverty reduction for its citizens" (West). It's political power in exchange for money, so the Chinese government needs citizens to keep working and contributing to the economy, or else there may be economic stagnation and thus political unrest.

Consequently, the issue of overwork extends beyond simple employee-company relationships. It's a complicated problem that could have severe consequences for the economic, social, and political climate of China. Beneath lie larger demographic problems. To understand the unique pressures faced by workers, one must understand the Chinese custom of filial piety, illustrated by Li Kung-lin's "Classic of Filial Piety," an eighteen-chapter modeled conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zeng Zi. As Confucius describes in Chapter One, "You received your self, your body, and your skin from your mother and father The beginning of filial piety is serving one's parents; the middle is serving one's ruler; the end is establishing oneself" (Goldin 107). In essence, filial piety's rationale for the traditional Chinese family structure is reciprocation, to provide for your parents as they have provided for you. Still, filial piety extends beyond simply providing for and supporting one's parents. When asked if following a father's decrees is an act of filial piety, Confucius exclaims "What kind of talk is this?" He goes on to describe that "whenever there is unrighteousness" in one's father or superior, it is the duty of the son or subordinate to challenge them to defend their honor and legacy by correcting their wrongs (Goldin 110). Filial piety, in this sense, is a constant striving not only to respect, but also to improve and carry on the legacy of one's parents.

Even though it is more than two thousand years old, filial piety still appears in every aspect of Chinese culture. In preparing children for China's infamous Gaokao, a college entrance exam that essentially determines one's future, parents often toil to provide their children with the best education and resources possible so that they can have the best shot at landing a lucrative job. The stress felt by Chinese students regarding the Gaokao, which sometimes goes as far as suicide, comes in part from feeling of responsible for their parents' sacrifice (Ash). This same filial relationship also applies to tech employees, as they are sold into the idea by both themselves and executives like Jack Ma who argue that working 996 is the least they can do to provide for their parents and support their children. These pressures are only exacerbated by China's one-child policy, which prohibited Han Chinese families from giving birth to more than one child and, as a result, caused many families in China to fall into a 4-2-1 structure, where one child must support two parents and four grandparents (Campbell). As a result, many children feel significant pressure to succeed financially since, as single children, they represent the only hope for their parents and must also support two separate generations. These combined pressures can reduce the desires of today's college-age

Chinese to have their own children, despite the current three-child policy (Song). As Ziyi Zuo, a twenty-two-year-old college graduate explains, “These kids faced involution from the moment they were born. Their edges were slowly knocked out to just fit in the society’s rules of competition Why would I want to bring life to Earth, only for them to suffer through all of it?” (Zuo qtd. in Song).

China’s issue of overwork might thus be attributed more to cultural norms and familial expectations than to grounded economic reasoning. While some employee criticisms are pay-based, such as the extreme case of the underpaid delivery man who committed self-immolation, employees who choose to ‘lie flat’ or ‘let it rot’ are almost always concerned with their health, stress, or work satisfaction. Meanwhile, their CEOs continue to cite reasons like ‘providing for one’s family’ as justification for 996 work hours. In response to questions regarding his e-commerce company JD.com’s support of 996, CEO Richard Liu stated that although his company doesn’t force the 996 schedules, “Those who fool around all day long are not my brothers! I am responsible for the 180,000 families behind the 180,000 brothers. So, I cannot cover for those one percent who fool around, I have no choice!” (Liu qtd. in Jung). Liu sounds more like a father disappointed in a lazy son than an employer disappointed in an underperforming worker, especially since he refers to his employees as ‘brothers.’ That is to say, the desire to force longer hours upon employees seems propelled by the expectations of filial piety for employees to provide for not just their own families, but for their metaphorical corporate family.

Interestingly, when examining other countries, there seems to be an effective and practical solution to the problem of overworking: simply working less. One study, operated by the think tank Autonomy and the non-profit organization 4 Day Week Global, had 61 companies in the UK participate in a six-month trial where employees would be paid the same as before, but work only four days a week. The study found that after the four-day work week was implemented, “39% of employees were less stressed, and 71% had reduced levels of burnout,” while revenue growth remained consistent at a 1.4% average (Lewis et al. 7). In summary, the study found no change in the company’s performance and significant benefits in the form of employee satisfaction and employee retention.

Ultimately, however, it doesn’t matter whether a four-day work week would solve China’s labor issues, because it is incompatible with Chinese culture and perception of work. CEOs like Jack Ma and Richard Liu will continue to encourage 996 because it creates the perception of worker loyalty and contribution, even if these hours are less efficient. Workers will continue to overwork themselves and burn out from the burden of supporting their parents and their companies. The Chinese government’s actions, imitating the nature of reciprocity in filial piety, will continue to pursue economic growth in return for obedience and respect, even if it demands using authoritarian

means like censorship to keep citizens working and happy. Chinese thinking is invariably tied to Confucian values and familial ideals, and thus Chinese relationships, actions, and society will reflect a desire to adhere to those values of respect, obedience, and reciprocity. Workers will have to choose between their biological families, their companies, and their government as each one continues to vie for their filial piety. And if these three families continue to have conflicting demands, the pressure will only push more people to lie flat, or worse, to die.

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