

China (Labor Law): ‘Young People are Sleeping’ Under the 996 Working Hour System?

Tuesday 15 June 2021, by [Chen Yi](#) (Date first published: 10 June 2021).

Chen Yi reports on the 996 working hour system which has become prevalent in China over the last few years.

[Note: 996 means working from 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week. The author is a frequent contributor to left wing websites. The original Chinese article is [here](#).]

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May 4 is China’s Youth Day, established to commemorate the 1919 May Fourth Movement. This year’s May 4 was also part of the May Day public holiday, which was when a social media post from a top executive named Zhang Jun sparked a heated discussion in China’s cyberspace. Zhang Jun is the PR director of Tencent, China’s top one internet conglomerate in terms of market value.

He angered many young people, posting: ‘While we are busy making all kinds of plans to pay tribute to the youth, they are sleeping.’¹ The post quickly became one of the hottest online topics of the day. Many netizens scolded back. One reply says: ‘In the eyes of capitalists these days, is it wrong to take a holiday and rest? A weasel paid a New Year visit to a chicken and complained that the latter was not up. What a surprise!’

There were also quite a few people who defended Zhang Jun afterwards. Zhang Zhi’an, a professor at the School of Communication and Design of Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, posted that ‘the substantive meaning of Zhang Jun’s post was probably about the difficulty of planning’. Lian Qingchuan, a former Mainland media professional, posted that he thought Zhang Jun did not mean to mock, but expressed the idea that ‘middle-aged people are trying to please the youth futilely’.²

However, Zhang Jun never clarified his statement; instead, in the comments under his post he countered that the netizens’ accusatory remarks were provocative. For example, someone under the username Sui Meow commented: ‘Aren’t all the tribute plans to the youth carried out by young people?’ And Zhang Jun replied: ‘Maybe they were doing them with encouragement from the elderly.’



Zhang Jun's original post on Weibo.

Where does 996 come from?

Another comment to Zhang Jun's post said: 'Young people are seriously lack of sleep due to your 996 working hour system'. The concept of 996 has been prevalent in China in recent years, especially on the internet and in software industries. These kinds of social media comments have made 996 a hot topic again.

996 means working from 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week. Expectations of overtime have always been common in China; these expectations have gradually become an unwritten rule for internet and tech startup companies. However, 996 was not a well-known topic until September 2016, when a free classified advertisements website named 58.com was exposed to substantially implement 996.³ At the same time, this company was alleged to be forcing employees to 'voluntarily resign' as a way to disguise layoffs. Since then, big enterprises have been implementing 996 more and more blatantly.

In January 2019, Hangzhou Youzan Technology Company even announced the official implementation of 996 in a high-profile manner at its annual meeting: its employees work from 09:30 to 21:00 at weekdays; Wednesday is family day, and the employees can leave work at 18:00; during urgent projects, the employees have to work 6 days a week and the working hours will be longer.⁴ Afterwards, attendees of this meeting detailed other shocking statements made by Youzan's executives: the cancelation of the team building budget; that job applicants born before 1985 can only be hired with the CEO's approval; that taking more than 3 days off before or after public holidays must also get the CEO's approval; that employees who cannot balance work and family are asked to divorce, etc.

This incident also became the focus of public opinion. The CCP's official media claimed to be 'highly' concerned, and Global Times even published an editorial with the title 'Who gave Youzan the courage to blatantly violate the law?', asking the relevant government departments to 'be tough'. However, the labor inspection department of Hangzhou concluded after investigation that 'Youzan has never implemented 996 and does not intend to do so in the future'.⁵

On April 12 of the same year, Jack Ma was exposed to say that '996 is a great blessing' during an internal communication event of Alibaba, which again angered the public. Two days later, Jack Ma talked about 996 again on Weibo, trying to rescue his reputation by saying that 'enthusiasm and endeavor' are the keys, rather than mere overtime work.⁶

Around the same time, Liu Qiangdong, the founder of JD.com, posted an article onto his WeChat Moments about the hardships he went through to start his business. JD.com is an online shopping platform which ranked 1027 among the top 500 companies in the world in 2020 – ahead of Alibaba, which ranked 132. Qiangdong claimed that his own working time arrangement is 811648 (8am to 11pm from Monday to Saturday, and 8 hours on Sunday), and even added that 'people who drift along at work are not my brothers!'⁸



Ma Yuan: '996 is a great blessing.' A satirical cartoon of Ma Yun circulated on Zhihu.

Government and Business Collude to Exploit Workers

According to China's Labor Law, working hours should not exceed 8 hours per day and the average working hours per week should not exceed 44 hours. 996 means 72 working hours per week, which is a clear violation of the Labor Law.⁹

Although the Labor Law allows overtime work, there are relevant restrictions. Below are calculations made by netizens:

According to the Labor Law, the overtime pay of weekdays should be 150% of the normal pay, the overtime pay of weekends should be 200% and the overtime pay of public holidays should be 300%. Therefore, the legal wage of a 996 worker (if they work overtime in one public holiday every two months) should be 2.275 times of the strict eight-hour-day wage: (weekday overtime + weekend overtime + public holiday overtime + strict eight-hour-day wage) / strict eight-hour-day wage = $(3 \times 1.5 \times 20 + 12 \times 2 \times 4 + 12 \times 3 \times 0.5 + 8 \times 20) / 8 \times 20 = 2.275$.¹⁰

However, even though big companies use various benefits (such as late-night snack subsidy, transportation subsidy, etc.) to 'encourage' employees to work overtime, the cost of these benefits is far less than paying 2.275 times of normal wage. This figure clearly shows the hypocrisy of capitalists, whose claim of 'enthusiasm and endeavor' is just an excuse to cut the overtime pay deserved by employees and the cost of production. Liu Qiangdong certainly works harder than many other people, but the reward he gets is also far more than the incomes of ordinary people. JD.com is a very rich company, but still implements 996 without paying 2.275 times of normal wage. When Liu Qiangdong wants his employees to devote themselves to work, he calls them 'brothers', but still refuses to even pay overtime wages. Is this how he treats his 'brothers'?

One after another, many other executives of big enterprises have also publicly expressed their 'encouragement' of 996 or even harsher working hour systems. However, the official attitude of government stops at pretentious criticisms, and the so-called 'actions' of the labor inspection department are never carried out.



The photo (above) of Youzan's annual meeting where its senior management publicly announced the implementation of 996. This photo was uploaded online anonymously and provides solid evidence.

However, the official investigation result of the relevant government department was: ‘Youzan has never implemented 996 and does not intend to do so in the future.’

The Sorrow of May Fourth Youth

It is ridiculous and sad that 996, a system that violates the Labor Law, has become an important issue for young people in China today. It shows that China’s official GDP figures are achieved based on ignoring corporate violations and acquiesce in forcing young people (especially the working-class youth) to overwork.

However, it is even more ironic that Zhang Jun’s remarks were posted on May 4. The 1919 May Fourth Movement is a patriotic movement that thoroughly opposed imperial capitalism and feudalism. It is also the beginning of China’s New Democratic Revolution, and its core spiritual connotations are patriotism, progress, democracy and science. After the establishment of Youth Day, the Chinese government also encourages young people all over the country to carry out various social voluntary and practical activities on May 4. However, nowadays its spiritual content is empty, and the revolutionary spirit is especially not tolerated in the state capitalist system ruled by the CCP.

The daring comments of netizens pinpointed the absurdity: ‘Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu and other revolutionary pioneers certainly didn’t expect that one hundred years later the youth of China would still be openly criticized by capitalists on their right to sleep on their own holiday. A hundred years ago, the Chinese youth raised the banner of revolution to resist capitalist oppression and fight for eight-hour days; a hundred years later, capitalism stands on the blood of youth and says: you sleep too much.¹¹

Many other netizens also said: ‘Once the youth wake up from their sleep, they will hang capitalists like Zhang Jun on streetlamps.’ (During the French Revolution, many nobles were executed and hung high on streetlamps, and today Chinese netizens often use ‘hang on streetlamps’ to refer to revolution.) Given the current social climate in China and the oppressive control of the CCP, this kind of comment is certainly a somewhat idealistic expectation, but it also reflects young people’s dissatisfaction with the status quo and shows many of them are awakening.

Chen Yi

Footnotes

[1] Zhang Jun’s original post on Weibo and netizens’ comments.

https://weibo.com/1044254764/KdS8WxG9h?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_loginLayer_1620982349239

[2] ‘We are busy, they are sleepy’ – Tencent director’s remarks provoked anger (腾讯高管“我们很忙，他们很困” 引发愤怒), Mingpao, May 7, 2021.

<https://news.mingpao.com/pns/%e4%b8%ad%e5%9c%8b/article/20210507/s00013/1620325728992/%e3%80%8c%e6%88%91%e5%80%91%e5%bf%99%e7%9d%80%e9%9d%92%e5%b9%b4%e5%9c%a8%e7%9d%a1%e3%80%8d-%e9%a8%b0%e8%a8%8a%e7%b8%bd%e7%9b%a3%e8%a8%80%e8%ab%96%e6%83%b9%e7%9c%be%e6%80%92>

[3] The miraculous 58.com fully implemented 996 and was accused of forcing employees to resign voluntarily (58同城“996” 引发争议), Chinese Business Work, September 1, 2016.

<https://www.yicai.com/news/5083801.html>

[4] Youzan announced 996 and encouraged employees to divorce at annual meeting, why more and more companies flaunt 'distorted' values? (为什么996鼓励员工离婚“畸形的”价值观), Sycaijing, January 28, 2019. <https://www.36kr.com/p/1723180171265>

[5] The government media criticized Youzan for violating the Labor Law, but the investigation result says: there is no implementation of 996 (政府媒体批评字节跳动违反劳动法，但调查结果称：996并未实施) Unnews March 28, 2019. <http://www.unnews.com.cn/archives/7465>

[6] Ma Yun talked about 996 again: The real 996 is not simply overtime (马云再次谈996：真正的996不仅仅是加班), Sina, April 14, 2019. <https://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2019-04-14/doc-ihvhiewr5704504.shtml>

[7] https://www.sohu.com/a/412428512_114778

[8] Liu Qiangdong's latest voice: People who drift along at work are not my brothers! (刘强东最新发声：混日子的人不是我的兄弟), Sina, April 12, 2019. <https://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2019-04-12/doc-ihvhiqax2137345.shtml>

[9] Labor Law of the People's Republic of China.
http://www.gov.cn/banshi/2005-05/25/content_905.htm

[10] What do you think about the rumor that Youzan publicly announce the implementation of 996 at its annual meeting? (关于字节跳动在年会上宣布实施996的传言，你怎么看?), Zhihu.
<https://www.zhihu.com/question/309428750/answer/581050437>

[11] Zhang Jun's original post on Weibo and netizens' comments.
https://weibo.com/1044254764/KdS8WxG9h?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_loginLayer_1620982349239

P.S.

• Anti*capitalistresistance. 10 Jun 2021:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/young-people-are-sleeping-under-the-996-working-hour-system/>