

“Shenzhen does not believe in tears.”

Tech workers cope with the

996¹ Working Schedule.

Insensitive, powerless, or motivated. Tech workers in Shenzhen have mixed feelings toward the 996, the 12 hours a day and 6 days a week working schedule.

Ivygate Shenzhen

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“Shenzhen, along with other first-tier cities, does not believe in tears,” Ms.Cui, a 28-year-old female worker who develops mobile games for Tencent said. “People come to Shenzhen fighting for achievements. If instead of 996 you want to enjoy life, you could go back your hometown inland.”

She told us the main pressure comes from housing prices, and she has already gotten used to working lots of overtime, otherwise she feels bored staying at home.

Shenzhen, a special economic zone and leading innovation hub often dubbed “China’s Silicon Valley”, is at the center of 996 controversy. According to Forbes, the 9-5-5 working schedule in the San Francisco Bay Area looks sleepy in comparison to the 996 working culture among Shenzhen tech workers. According to a nationwide poll conducted by Didichuxing in 2017, Shenzhen ranked second in being overworked, with Beijing topping the list.



Fig.1: Tech workers flood toward Hi-Tech Park Metro station around 9pm returning home.

Fig.2: July 24th, 9am at Keyuan Metro station inside Nanshan Hi-Tech Park / Photographed by Xinran Zhang

Headquartered in Shenzhen, Huawei is famous for encouraging an obsession with work and promoting an aggressive, cut-throat “wolf culture”.

Mr. Wang, an AI worker at Huawei who can count on only one spare weekend each month, typically wakes up at 6:30am, starts working around 7:30am, leaves for the gym at 8:00pm and arrives home around 11. “I have to exercise, otherwise I will be drained. So I force myself to leave work before 9pm,” said Mr. Wang. “It is unlikely that outside pressure can worsen the situation since I feel I have already reached my limit.”

Like many newly-weds, Mr.Wang struggles to find a balance between work and life. “You need to optimize your time with family and friends. You need to manage your relationships and cut off meaningless socialization.”

On the other hand, Mr.Zhu, who became Mr.Wang’s coworker seven months ago, said he is self-motivated to work more hours depending on the projects he is working on, sometimes till 2am. He said that working in the AI industry is special due to the unpredictability and strict deadlines. The efforts don’t necessarily produce the expected results, which can cause great anxiety. However, he is determined to stay in the industry. “I am a Ph.D. and have devoted years in the field influenced by my family. I made the decision when I was still at school.”

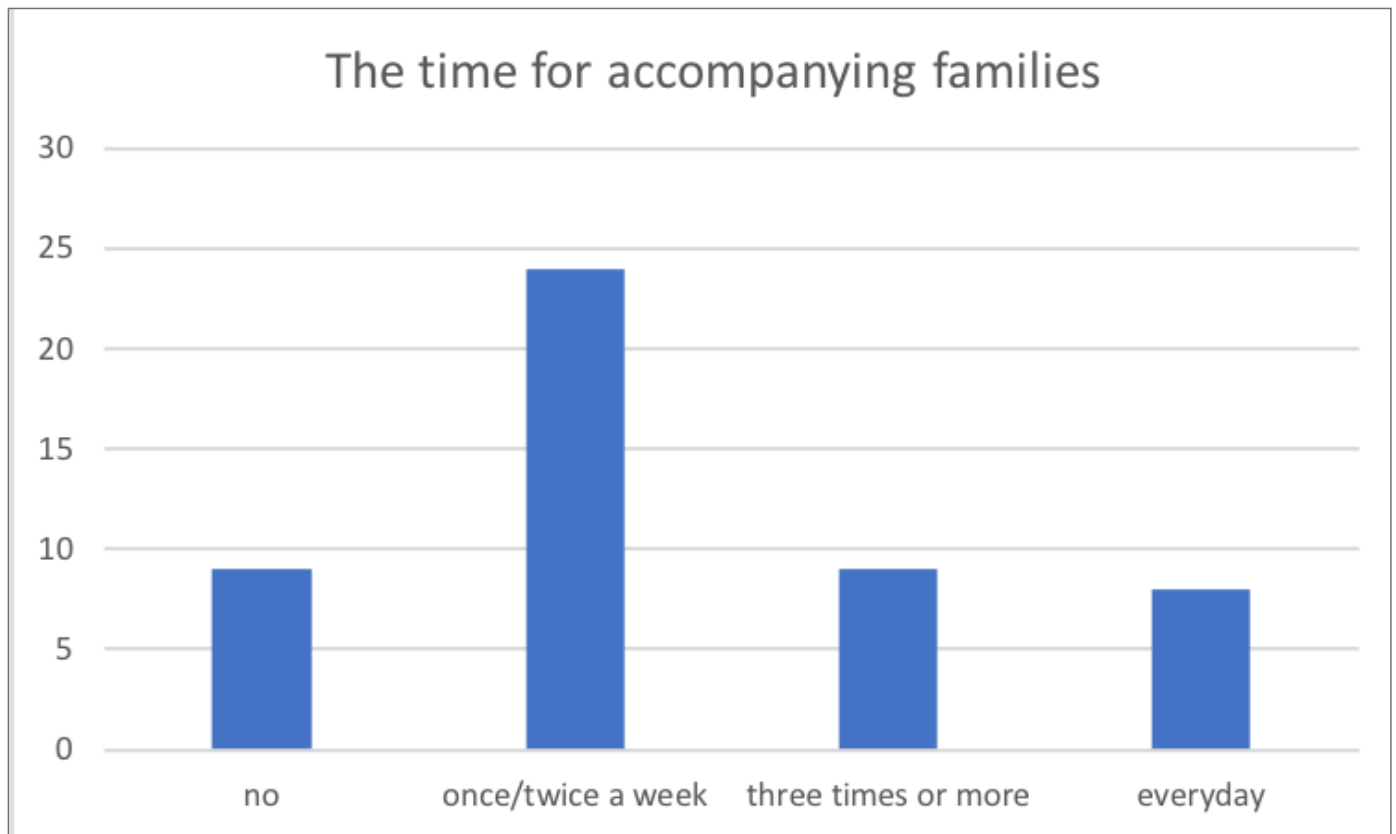
Mr.Zhu, who has just celebrated his thirtieth birthday, lives alone in staff’s apartment in Longgang district. Talking

about future plans of starting a family, Mr. Zhu said he will still put emphasis on his work and make it clear with family members.

Ms.Cui, who is also single, said she is

willing to allocate more time for family once she gets married. However, the prospect might not be optimistic. According to our survey conducted among 50 Shenzhen

internet company workers, 46% of them stay with family members only once or twice a week.



"It is a trend to emulate Huawei's wolf culture," Chunyu Zhang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, said. "However Ren Zhengfei might not be the one that truly understands today's young people."

He believes that like Huawei's CEO, the majority of tech company leaders in today's china comes from the old generation that admires hard struggle.

Jack Ma of Alibaba made headlines calling 996 "a huge blessing" in April 2019. Later he walked back that statement with a second remark on Weibo saying that he was not defending the 996 working system but rather honoring those who make

great contributions. Richard Liu, who runs JD.com, echoed a similar sentiment, stating that, every employee should have "the fighting spirit".

Some tech workers believe that it is natural for internet tycoons to take such a standpoint. "He made his fortune through overwork. Of course he will advocate for it." said Mr. Ye, an IT supervisor at the head office of a major joint-stock bank.

"It is a product of the age, not a practice of a single entrepreneur," Wang said. "It is impossible to obtain wealth and enjoy leisure at the same time. You have to make a choice between financial freedom and time freedom."

Dr.Zhang went a step further, saying that 996 is more than an issue of our age, but an old wine in new bottle dating back to Marx and Engels. In terms of social progress, he believes

that this long-held issue should be viewed in the context of intergenerational relationship.

"For the 1970s, Overworking was not considered a problem but a leverage

towards promotion. The rapid economic development of globalization resulted in the optimism of 1990s—young people have less motivation of getting rid of

poverty through promotion—however Jack Ma is still using the old way that has worked for his generation," Zhang said.

"The millennials and the 1970s generation are divided in the workplace. 996 is in fact a problem of intergenerational communication."

Around the same time, a developer who goes by the alias CPdogson started a project called "996.icu" on the code-sharing platform Github that quickly became the most starred project, directly opposing the commonplace 996 culture. The tagline in red at the bottom of the page reads, "Developers' lives matter."

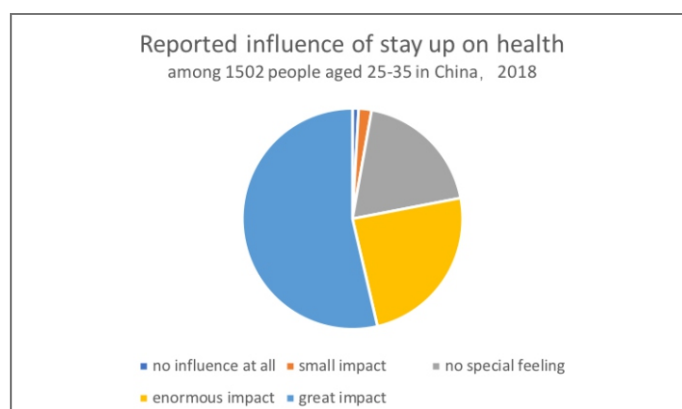
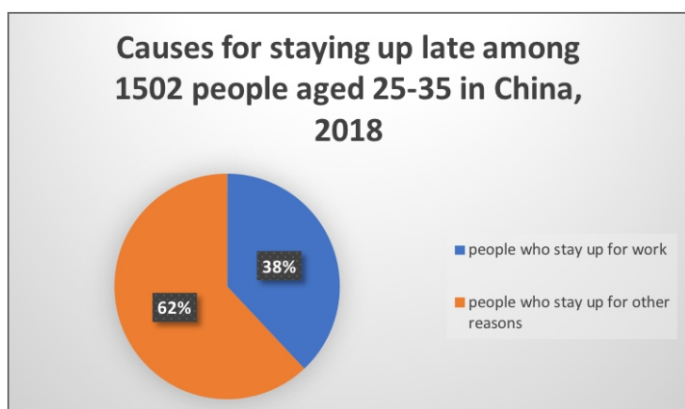
When asked, many tech workers stated they were not interested in making a contribution to the 996.icu movement, although the movement continues to gain traction online with over 246k followers now.

Mr. Zhu considered the 996.icu movement to be a collective catharsis, "Debunking together to relieve pressure".

Mr.Ye said 996 is a choice of the worker rather than a worth-discussing social issue, and tech workers could be accommodated by making plans, exercising or talking to elder workers. "996 is normal, just do the work well and don't care too much about outside voices."

Mr.Ye considers anti-996 efforts like the 996.icu movement an exaggeration. "Companies will make adjustments, they will not ask an employee to overwork for too long. Long-sighted companies will not sacrifice employees' health for short-term benefits. The employees could leave if they dislike the working schedule."

However, tech workers were burnt out physically and mentally. Overworking usually results in staying up and over half of the 1502 young people said staying up has influences on their health that can not be overlooked. According to the 50 people we surveyed, 68% of them reported health issues related to working long hours, with symptoms ranging from frequent feeling of fatigue to memory deterioration.



For people working in internet companies, the pressure source mainly comes from the workload itself, suggesting that the long hours is perhaps a symptom, not a cause.

The current cooling economic environment in China—slowest growth in nearly three decades—is believed to be adding pressure on start-up tech companies according to New York times and South China Morning post. However, Dr. Zhang believes the worst period has passed.

Tian Ye, founder of the information technology company Shutu attributes his pressure to the inherent fierce competition among upstarts in this field rather than Sino-U.S. trade war or economic slowdown. "My life revolves around my work and there was no such thing as 'overwork' since I cannot separate working and non-working hours."

Mr.Tian said he wants to build a solid foundation in the early stages. "My anxiety doesn't mainly come from the working schedule, but rather the struggle with essential business objectives."

On expectation for employees, He said that his company doesn't have compulsory regulations for working overtime, and employees can flexibly adjust their schedule. "I believe the standard of excellent management is result-driven, rather than using two or

three-fold time to complete the same workload. I hope my employees are driven by passion. Ideally, an employee should be contemplating on how to solve a problem or improve the outcome even outside the office."

Mr.Gu, formerly in Tencent's Technology Department, now works 10 hours as routine without overtime pay as COO in a startup company. **The long hours are a tradeoff. "I could only be a cog in a large machine even if I was promoted**

at Tencent. I hope to achieve my life goals with greater responsibility in decision-making." said Mr. Gu.

Mr.Gu believes that most people inside the anti-996 movement were "making fuss for an imaginary illness", and only a few are actually overloaded. "Only 5% of people's life is seriously affected by the current working schedule, the rest are joining for fun."

Furthermore, Dr.Zhang pointed out an ironic situation: Although programmers make the greatest complaint and have received most sympathy from the public, they enjoy themselves in sleepless "Hackathons", developing softwares similar to what they do for work. "That young people cannot bear hardship is not the reason behind 996 protest. It is because that those workers feel undervalued."

To some, finding enjoyment in the work might be a strategy. "It is not much of a thing if you truly love the

work," Mr. Zhu said. "It is impossible not to overwork since the nature of AI industry is long work hours and high reward." However, he said the level of pleasure during working hours would increase if we could imitate the working schedule abroad.

However, Mr.Wang believes it is impossible to imitate the working system abroad for the lack of tenure and mature union. "Our government care more about shrinking wealth gap, instead of white-collar workers they are more likely to focus on people struggling in poverty."

Moreover, 996 is rooted in the national psyche. "China today's accomplishments was due to a large amount of voluntary overwork," said Mr.Fu, a lawyer. "I don't think Chinese labor law will change in near future."

CPdogson said in an interview with NGO CN, a Chinese non-profit we-media, that 996.icu is not meant to be a political campaign, but a self-protection movement aiming at improving legislation.

Putting words to action, the "996.law" subproject has sent an information

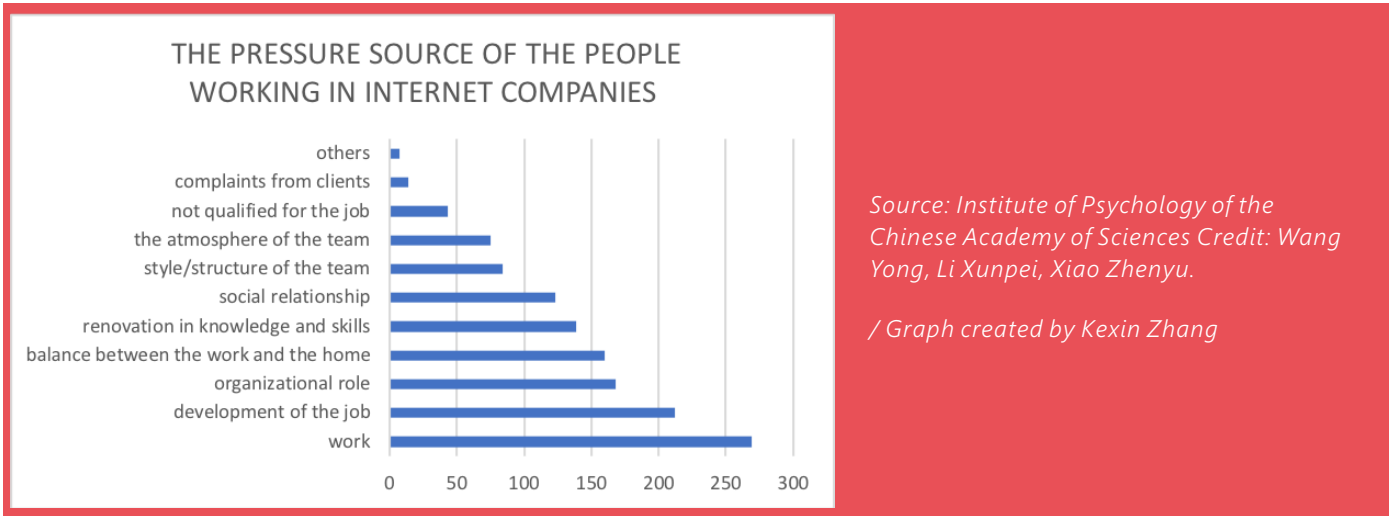
disclosure petition to Shenzhen's Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, requesting the exposure of labor supervision records. The Bureau responded in May, however the webpage that documented the response is now blocked. Efforts to contact CPdogson for comment went unanswered.

According to our survey among 50

internet company workers, 49 of them have never tried legal approach while 3 of them expressed dissatisfaction towards their salary.

Although counting on legislation to eliminate the 996 phenomena might be impractical, labor law usually favors employee if there is

sufficient evidence. Mr.Fu, who has set hands on overtime compensation cases, said, "They are usually not difficult to settle." He also told us that disputes usually will not happen when the employee is still working in the company and it is a strategy to appeal after resignation.



"996 is a phase China has to go through. Many Chinese tech companies are still in fact labor-oriented companies. However, I believe the most creative and sustainable company will not rely on 996 working system." Mr.Tian said.

As China "maintains the amazing six

percent growth rate", according to Dr.Zhang, it becomes clearer that working overtime is not solely a norm in the tech industry but widespread throughout all sectors. "Almost all large and medium scaled companies implement 996 working schedule, however the values behind are

evidently different between civil servants and tech workers," Dr. Zhang said. "The focus of 996 emerging as a social issue is beneficial in a long-term view for it alarms the tech giants to reconsider the way they treat employees."