A Game Theoretic Analysis of the Formation of and Solutions to 996 Working Schedules in China

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Abstract

The 996 working schedule has been a troubling problem in China, causing trouble for countless workers. It mandates working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day for six days a week. While many papers have investigated why 996 can exist from a macro point of view, this paper particularly analyzes the formation of 996 from a micro perspective. This paper uses game theory models to examine how interactions among the parties involved can eventually lead to the prevalence of 996. In addition to that, this paper proposes solutions to resolving 996, showing how these solutions can alter the behaviors of employers and employees and eventually motivate both sides to abandon 996.

1 Introduction

During the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century, China emerged as a rising economic star, from a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of less than 2 trillion yuan in 1990 to more than 100 trillion yuan in 2020 (National Data, 2014). This more than fifty-fold increase marks the high rate of economic growth China has experienced in the past few decades. Under the guidance of Xiaoping Deng, a former leader of China, the market structure of China underwent major changes. It transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. This brought the previously closed economy of China onto the world stage, boosting China's economic data in the years that followed.

While China benefited greatly from this high pace of growth, certain problems also came along. As it continued to transition and develop, China faced problems such as environmental degradation, overproduction, corruption, etc (Łasak & van der Linden, 2019). Due to the government's emphasis on economic development, priority on efficiency over equality has allowed unequal income distribution to worsen over the years. Laborers and workers in low social classes have suffered from the exploitation of elites and entrepreneurs.

Proposed initially by Jack Ma in a speech of his, 996 working schedule refers to working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week with only regular payments. Jack Ma even claimed that it was a "blessing" to the employees (The Week Staff, 2019). This working schedule requires workers to work 72 hours per week while not being paid for overtime work. Some researchers even consider this arrangement of work a modern form of slavery (Wang, 2020). There has even been a greater number of sudden deaths in those companies that practice this schedule.

The 996 schedule is partly the result of the worker's low social status pressured by the substantial population in China (Donaubauer & Dreger, 2018). There have been multiple attempts to remove 996 and seek higher workers' social status. Victims together launched online campaigns on popular platforms to resist excessive working

hours, with 996.icu being one of the most notable events on the GitHub repository. These resistances are followed by legal cases related to 996, where suffering workers sued companies that practice this schedule. In 2021, China's Supreme People's Court and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security declared 996 as an illegal practice, as it violates Article 36 of the Labor Law of the People's Republic of China, which mandates working time to be less than 44 hours per week and 8 hours per day. However, this statement failed to eliminate 996, allowing the presence of certain companies to continue exploiting their employees without being punished.

The severity of 996 extends beyond merely arousing discontent among workers. It has been shown that long working hours have detrimental consequences for workers. It significantly increases the chance of being troubled by cardiovascular diseases (Kivimäki, Jokela, et al., 2015), diabetes (Kivimäki, Virtanen, et al., 2015), and depression (Sparks et al., 1997). The ramifications that followed the implementation of 996 have been demonstrated in several real-life cases. In 2020 and 2021, there were two incidents in Pinduoduo, an e-commerce platform, where employees died due to long hours of working.

With the noted impact of the 996 working scheme and its prevalence in China, this paper particularly delves into the causes for the formation and solution of 996 from a theoretic point of view. I will use game theory models that resemble the interactions among the personnel involved to demonstrate how 996 can persist, and I will present some solutions to eradicating 996.

2 Literature Review

This section will provide insights into the existing discussions in the academic forum related to labor conditions and working hours. I will first discuss the literature related to the cultural context of China, which sets the stage for the presence of 996. Then, I will introduce the game theory concepts that will be used to analyze the circumstances.

2.1 China Context

There have been a significant number of studies on how the background conditions in China have contributed to the long working hours in China. Wang (2020) has investigated managers' usage of cultural context to force 996 upon employees. According to Wang, the 996 working scheme and other working schedules with similar properties and characteristics are forms of slavery or servitude, in which employees do not feel free to leave their workspaces. This is partly the result of Confucianism, a long-lasting cultural tradition that began in China thousands of years ago (Fan, 2010). Confucianism, which emphasizes obedience towards elders, is projected onto the employee-employer relationship, where the employer is seen as an elder, expecting obedience from employees. A fear of dismissal inspired by such culture is crucial for the employees to obey what the employers demand them to do. To secure their position in the company, employees, especially those migrating from rural areas in China, will decide to comply with their employers. Even some take further actions, such as bribing, to escape the risk of getting unemployed (Wang, 2020).

Through a series of interviews with managers and workers, Wang (2020) was able to conclude how 996 could be enacted so widely in China that matching resistance was barely encountered. Many of the workers felt unsafe under the lack of supervision and protection in their working conditions. Workers desire to eliminate the feeling of vulnerability, especially in East Asia companies (Hofstede, 2005). The consequence of such a tendency is lower workers' status and greater managers' power, with employers imposing 996 on the employees.

Besides the influence of culture particularly unique to China, another factor that facilitates the implementation of 996 is the emergence of new technologies (Ayyagari et al., 2011). China, and most of the world, experienced rapid growth in technology in the last few decades. This has affected many aspects of people's lives, including their working environments, tools, and conditions. One of the products of this alteration is technostress, a term proposed by Craig Brod in 1984, referring to people's inability to deal with new technologies healthily. In Ayyagari et al. (2011), the researcher

investigated the characteristics of information and communication technologies that contribute to stress in individuals, confirming the prevalence of technostress. This investigation is significant and relevant to 996 because technostress, and thus technological advancements, are among the causes of long working hours, alongside rules and regulations set by institutions and labor laws (Green et al., 2021), economic conditions (Golden, 2008), and the level of competition in the market (Kalleberg, 2009).

In addition to these backgrounds, certain mechanisms are also important reasons for the persistence of 996 in China (Zheng & Qiu, 2023). Zheng and Qiu proposed that hegemonic despotism is the underlying mechanism behind 996. Through data collected from six Chinese internet firms, they discovered that coercive and normative mechanisms built up hegemonic despotism. The coercive mechanisms are the informal requirements by managers for longer working hours, while the normative mechanisms refer to establishing norms that align employees' efforts with company goals, such as a rewarding and penalizing system. This despotism is capable of eliciting compliance and consent easily from employees, resulting in their acceptance of long working hours and 996.

2.2 Game Theory Concepts

Game theory is a branch of economic analysis where more than one agent makes decisions according to a set of rules and receives interdependent payoffs. First coined by Neumann and Morgenstern (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944), game theory has laid the foundation for many mathematical analyses of the interactions among rational people. Though there had been discussions regarding strategic decision-making before that, they were the first to establish game theory as a formal field of study and introduced cooperative games.

One of the most significant theoretical developments in the subject of game theory is the raising of the Nash Equilibrium (Nash, 1950). It showed that there is at least one equilibrium point, where no agents in the game can increase their payoffs by unilaterally switching their strategies. This point is named the Nash Equilibrium point.

It implies theoretical predictability in the outcome of a sequence of interactions and decision-making. This concept can be applied to a variety of games, providing solutions to many practical problems in fields like political science, biology, and computer science.

The field of game theory incorporates many different kinds of games. Three common criteria for the classification of games are whether decisions are made simultaneously by all agents (Simultaneous Game vs Sequential Game), whether the information is disclosed to all agents (Perfect Information Game vs Incomplete Information Game), and whether cooperation is allowed (Cooperative Game vs Non-cooperative Game). There are many other different ways of classification, and they vary based on the problems that they aim to tackle. Specifically in this paper, I am going to investigate ultimatum games, prisoner's dilemma, and cooperative games.

3 How 996 was Formed

The formation of 996 in China is a complicated matter. That it has only persisted in China but not in most of the other countries is a problem that resulted from many factors. As mentioned above, from a macro point of view, there are components unique to Chinese society and the overall atmosphere that together forged the 996 working schedule. In the following subsections, I will investigate and deduce how, from a game theoretical point of view, the interactions among the personnel involved will likely produce the endurance of 996.

3.1 Employer-Employee Interactions

The two primary and core agents that ought to be considered in this formation of 996 are the employers and the employees. Their interplay can be modeled through an extension of the ultimatum game.

The standard ultimatum game is played between two players, where one player, the proposer, proposes a method of splitting a sum of money between the two players, and the other player, the responder, responds to the proposed method by accepting or

rejecting (Güth et al., 1982). If accepted, then the sum of money will be split according to the proposed method. If rejected, both players will receive no money. The rational model of an ultimatum game predicts that whatever the proposer offers to the responder, the responder will accept the offer.

		Responder	
		Accept	Reject
Proposer	Offers x $(s \geq x > 0)$	$(s - x, x)$	$(0,0)$
	Offers 0	$(s, 0)$	$(0,0)$

The table shown above demonstrates the choices and payoffs for the proposer and the responder. For each input, the first number represents the payoff for the proposer, and the second number represents the payoff for the responder. The dominant strategy for the responder is to accept the offer regardless of the proposer's proposal. The proposer, to ensure that the responder is motivated to accept the proposal and to avoid the responder's social comparison effect (Gerber et al., 2018), will offer a small amount. Therefore, though the Nash Equilibrium of the game falls at where the proposer offers 0 and the responder accepts the offer, most experimental results reflect that there is a tendency for the proposer to offer 1.

The rules of ultimatum games can be projected onto the employer-employee scenario where the employer plays as the proposer and the employee plays as the responder. The employer will have the right to decide the proportion of the profit to give the employee and the work that will be assigned to the employee. They have more influential right over the employees, setting demanding working schedules with limited room for negotiation. Thus, the employer has choices similar to what a proposer has. On the other hand, an employee can only accept or refuse the job offered by the employer. If the employee refuses, then the employer will not employ the employee. The employer will have no one to work for him and, thus, no profits to gain. The employee will not have a source of income and, thus, no profits to gain. This corresponds to the scenario in the ultimatum game where the responder rejects the proposer's proposal.

However, as the original ultimatum game model predicts, the responders will choose to accept the proposer's proposal as a Nash Equilibrium. Therefore, employees are pressured to accept the 996 working schedules, despite knowing that it is unfair to themselves. They are more willing to receive a low and unfair benefit than receiving completely nothing. Employers understand such tendencies of the employees and will popularize 996 to exploit more values from the employees and to gain more profits for themselves.

3.2 Employee-employee Interaction

While the ultimatum game can mostly model the situation between employers and employees, it does not consider the factor that there is more than one employee in the labor market, so the interaction between employees also matters.

The interaction between employees is similar to scenarios in a prisoner's dilemma. The prisoner's dilemma is a game introduced by Albert W. Tucker in his lecture. It describes two suspects who are interrogated separately for a crime, and each is given the choice of cooperate or defect.

		Prisoner 2	
		Cooperate	Defect
Prisoner 1	Cooperate	$(-1,-1)$	$(-10,0)$
	Defect	$(0,-10)$	$(-5,-5)$

They interact according to the above chart where the first number in each entry represents prisoner 1's utility and the second number in each entry represents prisoner 2's utility. The optimal outcome for the two prisoners is that they both cooperate. Nevertheless, the Nash Equilibrium of this game falls into both prisoners defecting, because when they both cooperate, each of them has the motivation to defect. This game was a challenge to Adam Smith's theory that individuals' self-interested acts will lead to positive outcomes for society. In a prisoner's dilemma, if each prisoner acts selfishly, they will both defect and the situation will not be the socially optimal outcome.

This can be correlated with how an employee interacts with another employee through “involution”. Involution refers to the zero-sum competition of limited development (Chen & Zhang, 2022). It is a social phenomenon popular particularly in China, reflected by, for example, workers working harder to outcompete other workers. Under the 996 context, when they are given the offer of adopting a 996 working schedule, they can either reject or accept it. If they both reject, their united effort will force the employer to abandon the 996 scheme, which is the optimal result for the employees. Nevertheless, due to the common practice of involution that took root since childhood, they might choose to accept 996 to prove their better working ability than the other employee, which is cheating the other employee. If cheated, the other employee will face unemployment. Therefore, as a side-effect of involution, each employee also has a motivation to cheat on another employee to avoid the risk of losing the job and to acquire a stable life. These two effects encourage employees to cheat instead of cooperating. The employees’ interactions will come to the Nash Equilibrium where all employees who decide to practice involution or who consider the risk a greater problem cheat and adopt 996. As for the employers, they will be satisfied with the circumstances as long as a sufficient number of employees cheat on their peers and fill in all the labor they need.

4 How 996 Can Be Eradicated

As a problem that has widespread consequences, 996 needs to be mitigated to ensure the well-being of the employees and the major population. In the following subsections, I will investigate how 996 can be relieved or resolved by changing the behaviors of the employees and by changing the behaviors of employers. Specifically, I will show how cooperation among employees and cultural changes will affect employee behaviors and how adjustment of mechanisms will affect employer behaviors.

4.1 Employee-side Solutions

One of the key motivations for employees’ decision to accept 996 is the fear that

other employees will accept 996, leading to the normalization of such a system. They will be competitively disadvantaged when they apply for a job compared to employees who accept 996. Then, they will face social and professional pressure stemming from problems such as unemployment, similar to the situation of the person who cooperated when the other person defected in the prisoner's dilemma.

Nevertheless, this worry can be removed when the employees have a convenient and reliable channel of communication and cooperation with each other. If the employees can trust each other to cooperate and not accept 996, the prevalence of 996 can be inhibited. This can be investigated through cooperative games where players cooperate to reach mutual benefits. The essence of cooperative games lies in how collective strategies can increase the payoff for the players involved.

The conclusion drawn from the prisoner's dilemma, where the Nash Equilibrium lies in where both players defect, can only be sustained when the two players involved cannot communicate with each other. They cannot form coalitions to reach the mutually optimal solution of cooperation. Therefore, similar to the way to resolve the Nash Equilibrium in a prisoner's dilemma, employees can communicate with other employees in an attempt to build trust and agree on strategies to fight back the exploitative 996 schedule. This way, the employees can avoid looking out for other employees defecting, encouraging them to also reject 996.

While this kind of trust-based solution can be a way to reduce the number of firms practicing 996, it is not a credible threat for the employers or the employees who still do not wish to cooperate since there is no payoff punishment for those employees. Even after agreeing to cooperate, the employee does not have decreased utility if he decides to accept 996. Therefore, it is more efficient and effective to employ an enforcer that actually punishes the ones who defect. To achieve this, the payoff matrix can be altered as follows:

		Employee 2	
		Cooperate	Defect
Employee 1	Cooperate	(R, R)	$(S, T - X)$

	Defect	$(T-X, S)$	$(P-X, P-X)$

The values in the above matrix can be restricted by the following rule:

$$T > R > P > S \; and \; R + X > T \; and \; S + X > P$$

Without the interventions of X and the two rules that include X, the situation is a standard prisoner's dilemma. If the employees can reach a mutual agreement on punishment for defecting, the matrix will be changed to an extension of the prisoner's dilemma, incorporating the effect of the punishment. X represents the amount of punishment for defecting. With the appropriate size of X, which is obeying the rules above, both players have the motivation to unilaterally move from defecting to cooperating or stay cooperating regardless of the action of the other player. Thus, this new system can move the Nash Equilibrium to both cooperating, jumping out of the dilemma encountered in the original game.

This payoff matrix can be a model for the solution for the interactions between two employees, where cooperating refers to rejecting 996 and defecting refers to accepting 996. Under the modifications, the employees' interactions will result in both employees cooperating, and resisting 996 together. Whether through building trust or punishing defectors, the solution aims at encouraging cooperation among employees. With enough employees not cooperating, the critical mass of the prevalence of 996 cannot be reached. When labor supply in the market does not meet the minimum amount that ensures 996, the market can no longer withstand 996. Not enough labor is present to accept 996 and sustain the operation of the employers' demand. Then, employees can advocate for a healthier working schedule, forcing 996 out of the dominant position.

Therefore, though it takes time before the employees start to settle into the Nash Equilibrium, the modification will eventually lead to employees cooperating, fighting back against the 996 working schedule, and forcing employers to switch to other schedules.

Another perspective of solving 996 is through cultural changes. As mentioned before, involution is an important aspect of Chinese society that differentiates itself from other countries. It transfers conflicts between the employer and the employees to

conflicts between employees. Employees should focus their attention on how to resist the illogical schedule mandated by the employers instead of how to outcompete other employees by adapting to the schedule. This is similar to the situation in the delivery industry in China, where a delivery man gets paid lower and lower and has to travel faster and faster to fulfill the required time limits imposed by the company. Furthermore, Chinese people have a long history of being expected to make great achievements since childhood (Wang, 2020). They have had much experience prioritizing meeting these expectations over their health and happiness by the time they are looking for a job. The process of preparations for their college entry exam has already laid the foundation for the concept that grades matter more than anything for many people. The concept has been broadened into working environments, where many people put finding jobs and earning a high salary as the priority, neglecting other factors like personal time, recreation, and physical and mental health.

These cultural context issues have been contributing to the uprising of 996 particularly in China. Therefore, it is significant to change the mindset of the employees and let them realize the importance of health and personal growth. They need to be aware that they should seek ways to subvert the dominance of 996 rather than attempting to adapt to it. If they are not at all motivated to implement more reasonable working schedules themselves, a method to remove 996 would be meaningless.

To enforce this solution, social media and propaganda can be a powerful tool. Social media have been proven to be an effective way to influence the decision-making and actions of the general public (Gunther & Storey, 2003). If social media start to underscore how crucial it is to maintain a healthy lifestyle, stress the detrimental effects of overworking, especially 996, and show the benefits of focusing on one's happiness, people can start to understand that 996 is an adverse working culture and should be eradicated.

4.2 Employer-side Solutions

Besides changing the behaviors of employees, changing the behaviors of employers can also disclose solutions to 996. As a key player in the 996 working environment, employers can be motivated to eliminate 996 for their benefits.

The original intention of implementing 996 is to force the workers to work longer hours. For employers, this intention is beneficial since their employees can generate more utility for them without having to pay them extra. With the same amount of cost, they can generate more profits for the company. However, that has not been the case for many firms who started elongating working hours (Maciuca, 2021). Longer working hours have been demonstrated to have reduced productivity. This effect can become particularly apparent when the length of work extends from 40 to 50 hours per week to 72 hours per week, the mandated work of 996.

This effect is even magnified in China. To cope with the stress brought by the intensive work, workers in China have thought of many ways to avoid being mentally broken down. Gradually, people started loafing, or "Touching Fish" (Bao, 2022). Employees started using whichever methods they could find to avoid actually working, greatly decreasing their real productivity. Many engaged in non-work-related activities without being known by their employers such as using social media and watching movies (Zuo, 2021). Despite these phenomena, many employers still insist on a 996 working schedule because the employees have longer working hours. They see their employees paying more effort (working longer hours) than they would have if a normal schedule is employed.

Thus, to solve this issue, a change from an effort-centered rewarding system to a result-centered rewarding system is vital. Focusing too much on efforts causes employers to only consider what the employees have paid as the only criteria for judging the utility of an employee. They assume that the longer time an employee spends working, the greater utility this employee generates for the company, and the greater payoffs the employer receives. However, this assumption is based on the premise that efforts and progress are positively correlated, where greater efforts imply more progress.

Since this premise does not stand in the 996 working schedule situation, employers need to focus more on how much the employee can produce. It is more important to pay attention to the efficiency of the employees, to ensure that what they were expected to finish can be done. By shifting the performance metrics to focusing on the quality of results of the work produced, the employers can have a better knowledge of the utility of each employee and the total productivity of working hours as long as 996, reducing the problem of lowered profits for the employers and less healthy life for the employees.

5 Conclusion

The 996 working schedule is a problem that has taken root in many perspectives in China. It has been analyzed through multiple lenses by many papers, investigating how it has been so persistent. This paper joins this discussion by providing a game-theoretic point of view to analyze 996. How the interactions between employees and employers can eventually lead to the widespread adoption of 996 is examined. It is unique in that few papers have been microscopically delving into this issue. The dynamics in these games can be projected onto employees and employers, giving implications regarding the formation of 996.

Additionally, this paper also extends the discussion into the theoretical solutions to 996. Addressing it will require a multifaceted approach. There are actions and strategies both employers and employees can undertake to mitigate the issue. Employees can cooperate and focus more on themselves instead of working. Employers can look into better management techniques to boost their employees' productivity. Though these solutions have been proven to be theoretically successful, further research will be needed to confirm their efficacy.

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