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**From Precarity to Stability:
Job Preferences Among Chinese Youth in
Today's China**

By

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Table of Content

1. Introduction	2
2. Labor Precarity and Job Stability	7
2.1 China's Youth Unemployment Crisis	7
2.2 Neoliberal Economic Transition of China	12
2.3 Financial Independence in Precarity	14
2.4 Long-term Employment against Labor Insecurity	17
2.5 Stable Welfare and Labor Treatment	21
2.6 Stability in Precarity	25
3. Pursuit of Success	26
3.1 Success: Personal Wealth and Sustainability	26
3.2 Success: Family Expectations and Life Meanings	35
3.3 Cost of Success: Education, Competition, and Involution	43
4. Conclusion: Stable Job and Stable Life	52
Bibliography	54

1. Introduction

The late 1970s witnessed two significant events in the history of neoliberalism. In the leading Western economies like Britain and the United States, politicians like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher designed and instituted neoliberal restructuring projects to solve ongoing economic crises. On the other side of the earth, the People's Republic of China, after three decades of developing a socialist society and economy, engaged in its economic reform, building an alternative market economy that incorporated both neoliberal elements and authoritarian centralized control (Harvey 2005, 120). While Western scholars like Harvey called it “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics,” this system of integrated neoliberalism and authoritarianism is commonly referred to as the "socialist way with Chinese characteristics" (zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi) in Chinese, as if neoliberalism was never an essential factor that brought profound influences to the state and its economy.

As the second largest economy in the world today, China, since its economic reform with neoliberal characteristics from the late 1970s to 1990s, has maintained a phenomenally high rate of economic. Despite such economic success at the state level, in contemporary Chinese society, individuals, especially the Gen Z youth, increasingly complain about the precarious and difficult employment situation they experience in their emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000). In today's China, such youths typically work hard in the highly competitive education system to pursue a very limited number of adequate jobs for their educational attainment. However, as China is going through a serious youth unemployment crisis, the educated youth emerging from universities suddenly find themselves facing increasing labor precarity and

limited career opportunities. The surveyed youth unemployment rate peaked at 21.3 percent in June 2023, when the state announced it would no longer publish further youth unemployment data (Fu 2023). Troubled by unemployment, inadequate employment, and deteriorating labor conditions, China's exhausted and demoralized youth increasingly adopt a pessimistic, if not nihilistic, attitude toward the future of society, the state, and themselves (*The Economist* 2023).

Studies on contemporary Chinese youth have captured their gradual loss of faith over the past decades in the state that educated them to embrace struggle and work harder (*The Economist* 2023). However, while their discouraged peers are abandoning material ambitions and taking on flexible labor, some emerging youth, especially those from China's northern provinces, share an increasing preference for stable jobs in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Yue, Xia, and Qiu 2020). In provinces like Shandong, where massive state-owned enterprises (SOEs) still play an influential role in the local economy, young tertiary education graduates consider entering the SOE system to avoid unemployment and labor precarity. This seems to be another paradox that China's emerging youth, accordingly losing faith in the state due to economic issues, are finding faith in SOE jobs as a solution.

In the Maoist era, Chinese people described their SOEs as the "iron rice bowl," which promised significant stability through income, labor security, and social welfare (Berkowitz, Ma, and Nishioka 2017, 737). However, during China's economic reform in the 1990s, the state smashed its "iron rice bowl," replacing permanent employment with short-term labor contracts, and facilitating massive layoffs of more than 30 million workers (Gallagher 2005).

Nowadays, as they enter the increasingly precarious and competitive labor market, some of China's recent graduates, despite SOE's significant downsizing and reforms, still consider the state sector as a source of economic and labor stability (Standing 2021, 68).

My thesis research will explore the paradox of the Chinese youth who increasingly seek SOE jobs in the precarious labor market they perceive and experience. I aim to understand these emerging adults' ideas about their employment situations, labor experiences, career expectations, and the image of SOEs. As the huge and highly influential Chinese economy pushes its emerging workforce into precarity and inadequate employment, how educated Chinese youth understand their career-related experiences and perceive the employment difficulties they face can shape their life plans and career choices. This study will focus on such personal experiences and analyze their connections to the youth's expectations for ideal career paths and their pursuit of SOE jobs. My research supports the finding of previous scholars that the precarious labor situation experienced by today's Chinese youth began with the gradual process of the economic shift in Chinese society towards neoliberalism. At the same time, however, the youth suffering neoliberalism's precarious outcome still hold deeply neoliberal values, as many of my interviewees pursued personal material success through the long-term accumulation of their human capital. These neoliberal-style pursuits are often entangled with their reflections and struggles about their current suffering and precarity, creating a set of job preferences and expectations centered on the notion of stability.

In this study, I have interviewed 10 Chinese youth aged 22 to 26 who aim to work in China's SOEs. They are fresh tertiary education graduates who have started working for less

than one year and graduates-to-be who are actively planning their career paths. I interviewed each of them twice individually, discussing their personal backgrounds, working experiences, career expectations, and reasons to seek SOE jobs. The interview data showed common ideas among individual interviewees with distinct personal stories and backgrounds. In terms of employment situation, they showed a common sense of disillusionment and anxiety resulting from keen perceptions of the ongoing unemployment crisis and the increasing precarity they experience. Despite feelings of disappointment and insecurity, they designed their own goals for personal development as emerging adults based on their nuanced observations of various aspects of labor precarity. In terms of career expectations, they frequently mentioned the notion of success, which relied heavily on their ability to act as responsible and financially self-sustaining individuals who could take care of themselves independently. Such career success also involved non-material benefits from a job, such as long-term life security, the meaning of life, and the avoidance of endless toiling and severe competition. Finally, my interviewees introduced their expectations for the SOE jobs, which were associated with a vital notion of stability, a broad term that included a range of job characteristics to fulfill the career expectations of the youth, allowing them to seek personal success in the era of precarity.

Precarity, success, and stability are the three main topics to understand the pursuit of Chinese youth seeking SOE jobs. The notion of stability has been the main topic of my conversation with the youth, and this simple term stands for multiple different expectations of the youth for an ideal job. Most of them agreed that entering SOEs simply meant seeking

stability. For my interviewees who aimed to enter the SOE system, the construction of the notion of stability seemed to come not only from the public image of state-owned enterprises in Chinese society or the vivid experience of people working in SOEs but also from their own expectations of an ideal job. One interviewee who was about to graduate with a master's degree said, "Stability comes from the SOE system that we don't know well, but all we need to know is how the SOE and stability can help us." Another put it similarly, "The SOE's stability can give me stability in my life, and then I can solve my job issues ahead, and become the person I want to be." In other words, the youth perceived that the stability provided by work in Chinese enterprises could become just the right solution to the set of problems and risks they were concerned about, and at the same time, it could also fulfill their need for success, responsibility, and the meaning of life. When explaining the notion of stability, my interviewees typically described various benefits of stable jobs, rather than giving one precise definition. Such benefits from stability could help them avoid some precarity, achieve some aspects of individual success, or do both. With stability as its foundation, the individual success pursued by the youth was not limited to the material wealth of income. Stability was more than just constant working hours and a steady salary; it also included other factors of individual success that were not as closely related to the work itself. My interviewees invoked the ability to allocate and control their own time, establish long-term and stable social connections, and become successful individuals, fulfilling the expectations of themselves, their families, and society. The youth's construction of such an image of stability from SOEs could originate from their experiences of precarity and ideas of

success, which were the foundations of understanding stability and its importance. In the rest of this thesis, I will discuss the topics of precarity and success separately by introducing the neoliberal transitions that fostered the current circumstances, analyzing my interview data with the youth and their ideas, and discussing the particular characteristics of stability associated with that topic.

2. Labor Precarity and Job Stability

2.1 China's Youth Unemployment Crisis

My interviewees perceived China's economy and employment situation as extremely precarious. They repeatedly emphasized their concerns about the youth unemployment crisis in China and the severe issues of inadequate youth employment, which were seen as the primary threat to their career path and life plans. Unemployment was the most outstanding issue they had to face when these emerging adults planned for their future.

Before the youth unemployment rate peaked in 2023 and the state stopped publishing new data, it kept increasing for years, reaching several times higher than the unemployment rate of older generations, which remains around 5% (Schucher 2017). The Chinese youth have noticed their unemployment crisis. In social media and online chats, to avoid publicly expressing views critical of the current situation under the state's online censorship and surveillance, Chinese youth commonly use the term "poor general environment" (da huanjing buhao). This is a popular phrase in today's China to implicitly express one's concerns about various economic and social downturns. During the interviews, my interviewees typically

adopted such subtle hints and avoided any opinions that might be considered more radical.

Some of them expressed their fear that a more overt critique would lead to trouble, even though I had assured them of the confidentiality of our conversations.

Despite the fear of expressing critical opinions, my interviewees kept mentioning the “poor general environment” of China. In this case, they used the term to specifically indicate the employment-related crisis and difficulties, which have worried them significantly. Within the first five minutes of the first interview, my interviewee started talking about the distress and fear of unemployment. As a graduate student who had hoped for a research position in a local enterprise, she explained that she now only wished her future jobs could “provide the basic income necessary to fulfill her basic survival needs” due to the lack of confidence to face “the poor general environment” in one year. “I used to have more to expect, but now I expect to feed myself, and maybe with slightly healthy food,” she said. Many other interviewees in schools expressed similar feelings of stress and insecurity when they wanted to plan for their future career paths. Although they had not graduated yet, they paid close attention to employment statistics published by their colleges and kept a connection with older students who had already entered the labor market, from where they learned about the ongoing youth unemployment crisis. Normally, as college graduates, they are not the most vulnerable group of Chinese youth in the unemployment crisis, as their college degrees will help them find some jobs. However, it is not “some jobs” they are looking for. “The factory assembly line is actually quite empty for new assembly workers,” one interviewee who once interned in a factory for managerial positions told me. “But I don’t think it is a fitting job for

me, or I will fail my four years in universities,” he added. During the interviews, I came to realize that most of my interviewees did not consider professions such as factory workers, supermarket cashiers, or restaurant waiters as acceptable "normal" employment for themselves. In China, these professions are usually paid lower wages and practiced by people who do not have a university degree. Rather, the educated Chinese youth share higher ambitions to find jobs that befit their educational background, as well as their significant efforts to earn such education in China. Their wishes for adequate jobs are increasingly disillusioned by the unemployment crisis.

In the same era of the peaking youth unemployment, China's gross enrollment in tertiary education doubled in a decade, reaching 58% in 2021 (Feng et al. 2023). While the education system is expanding, jobs requiring such high-level education and specialized skills are still limited, resulting in issues of inadequate employment (Florida 2010). As a result, ironically, unemployment rises with the educational attainment of the Chinese youth, and one-third of recent graduates work in a job unrelated to their primary field of study (Schucher 2017, 87). Günter Schucher argued that the inadequate employment resulting from a mismatch between overqualified youth with specialized skills and low-quality jobs was a significant fear of Chinese youth and the primary reason for their labor precarity. He called such fear “the fear of failure,” which he believed emerged after the 1990s when market mechanisms started organizing the Chinese labor market. Doing low-quality or informal jobs was not necessarily an economic failure, but it would be a social failure for those highly educated job-seekers. Inadequate employment became a significant issue when China's expanding tertiary

education sector failed to match its students' skills with the relatively slower growth of high-quality jobs with high salaries (Schucher 2017). As the primary component of today's Chinese youth population, the young job-seekers who spent four years in higher education will not accept jobs like factory workers or convenience store cashiers as solutions to their problems of labor precarity. As a result, facing the gap between ambitious expectations and precarious reality, many of my interviewees told me that they felt defeated and scared. "I have been proud of my hard work that earned me a decent college degree," said a recent graduate from a top Chinese university, "but now I am afraid that it will only bring me nothing, or worse, a very few things." Such reward in the job market for their educational background could never match their career prospect and hardship in schools.

Despite the disillusionment and disappointment of their current employment difficulties, my interviewees hardly associate such negative attitudes with the state itself. More commonly, their critiques of the unemployment crisis and labor precarity were limited to the economy and society. The term "poor general environment" was almost specifically adopted to refer to a less general range of notions about employment or economic opportunity, rather than the political environment. As criticizing the state was prohibited and individuals may be punished, my interviewees only made complaints about the economic environment in subtle ways that were not specifically directed at the state itself. Out of the need to build rapport and mutual trust with my interviewees, this study did not include questions about political factors and the state that might be considered inappropriate by the youth, whose opportunities to work in SOEs may be impacted once they end up getting punished for their critiques. In more

accepted discussions about social issues like labor precarity and unemployment, no interviewee accused the state of causing any of such issues, either explicitly or implicitly. For them, unemployment seemed to be a purely economic and social problem, and exploitive employers and companies that frequently lay off their employees were common targets for blame. Besides the fears and concerns about the conservative social atmosphere, another noticeable factor that shaped such a collective view was the very limited personal interests of my interviewees about state policies and broader political topics. Most of them took a practical perspective, believing that learning about the state's macroeconomic policies and economic history was unhelpful in solving their immediate and future problems. "It is wiser for us to address our own problems first," a serious-looking interviewee carefully said. Such a "problem" meant to find a decent job, make some money, and, according to him, "think about other practical problems at that moment." Such "practical problems" included typical life events like getting a promotion, buying a house, and getting married, with almost completely apolitical stances. It seemed that the limited interest in politics and emphasis on economic lives was a product of both the youth's active avoidance of public dissent and their neoliberal transformation to active accumulators of human capital and responsabilized workers.

My disillusioned interviewees knew well about the economic consequences of failing to find an adequate job in this "poor general environment." They focused on three major aspects, including the widening wealth gap and rising living expenses, the lack of social welfare and long-term financial security, and exploitive labor conditions. Unlike the youth unemployment that started to rise only in this decade, none of the issues above, as a few of

my interviewees mentioned, are new problems existing only in today's China. Rather, they are rooted in the early stages of China's economic transition to today's government-led neoliberalism. This transition period from the late 1970s to the 1990s has profoundly shaped the socio-economic reality of China, in which today's Chinese youth grow up and gradually experience precarity created during such an economic reform toward neoliberal economic policies.

2.2 Neoliberal Economic Transition of China

The Chinese economic reform started by marketizing and privatizing a large share of the state's economy, introducing the contractualization of labor relations, which was rarely practiced in the Maoist era. Dramatic changes in economic life quickly created economic inequality and labor precarity, and the pursuit of personal wealth emerged as the defining factor of individual success.

In Maoist China, a majority of the urban population was allocated by the state to permanent employment in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that dominated the entire economy (Harvey 2005, 125). On the eve of neoliberalization, the state sector absorbed more than 60 percent of industrial workers in China, producing 89 percent of the country's gross value of industrial output (Walder 1984, 36). Under the egalitarian labor policy of "low wage, high employment," the state was committed to creating jobs and securing employment rather than individual wealth, while limited consumer goods were rationed to individuals and households (Walder 1984, 22). The state sector was also responsible for providing security of employment, considerable welfare, and various pension benefits to its workers. The State

provided these basic social services through state-owned work units, around which permanent factory workers formed close social ties in their workplace and collective communities. In such urban work-unit communities, people lived largely collective lives with job security and work-unit-granted welfare in a planned economy characterized by limited personal wealth and considerable labor security.

Since 1978, Chinese economic reform changed everything. The economic priority of the state shifted from securing employment to maximizing economic growth. A largely market economy was organized around consumer goods, while private firms emerged with increasing economic significance, replacing the shrinking state enterprises that could no longer afford comprehensive welfare while earning profits in market competition. Thus, the state withdrew from social welfare provisions, leaving housing and medical care privatized and marketized (Yan 2012). In terms of labor relations, the reform introduced market mechanisms, which replaced the socialist system of state-directed labor allocation that secured full employment of the labor force (Ngok 2008). The contractualization of labor terminated the practice of permanent employment, and under new labor policies such as the 1994 Labor Law, employers could easily lay off contract workers. The private sector of the economy became "centres of entrepreneurialism, flexible labor practices, and open market competition" and powered China's phenomenal growth rate since the 1980s, as the entire Chinese economy moved towards a distinct neoliberal structure from the Maoist state (Harvey 2005, 129). Then, the neoliberalizing state achieved its economic prosperity with a spectacular GDP growth rate, averaging 10 percent a year (Harvey 2005, 122).

2.3 Financial Independence in Precarity

The rapid transition to neoliberal economic policies soon resulted in various social and economic issues, such as the emergence of economic inequality. Social inequality expanded together with the Chinese economy, creating further gaps in incomes between classes, social strata, and regions (Harvey 2005, 143). Some individuals who succeeded in the fast-growing economy became rich quickly, while many others struggled to find work in the newly established labor market. While such inequality created a large, poor, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labor force at the bottom of society, emerging large private companies accumulated significant wealth from corruption, private connections with government officials, and speculation at the top (Harvey 2005, 146). The state had no intention to promote such inequality, but it failed to react to such issues with effective policies and regulations. Thus, the market economy grew with limited authoritarian centralized control, and China witnessed the emergence of a new upper class with significant economic power, as well as an equally new social middle class, from where my interviewees came (Harvey 2005, 29; Nathan 2016).

All of my interviewees stated that they came from middle-class families in Chinese cities. Their parents started working in the 1980s and 1990s when China's economy began to take off, emerging as the first generation of the Chinese middle class (Nathan 2016).

Through twenty to thirty years of hard work, their families accumulated enough resources that enabled my interviewees to enjoy decent material conditions and education. Unlike their parents, many of my interviewees never wished to climb up the class ladder in the first place.

Rather, they cared about maintaining the same living standard after leaving their parents and living independently. “Leaving the university and earning a wage means you are a true adult who is responsible for taking care of yourself and maybe your family,” said a graduating college student, “but without a proper job, how could I take care of myself?” Many interviewees told me that they felt insecure about living on their own while facing the precarious labor market. They were torn between becoming financially independent adults and maintaining their usual standard of living, which required much more money than what an inadequate job could offer in Chinese cities. The youth expressed their gratitude for the financial and emotional support and dedication from their parents for decades, and they aimed to lift such burdens from their parents, earning salaries to live on their own. “It is our responsibility to do so,” many interviewees conveyed such an idea of responsibility for an adult in their ways, “responsible adults should make the money they spend, rather than endlessly take money from the family, like bugs hollowing out the roof beams.” This metaphorical language is widely used in China to describe lazy and greedy children, endlessly consuming the wealth their parents have worked so hard to create. Thus, my interviewees believed that they had a certain responsibility to do the correct thing, as proof of their adulthood and a relief of their parents’ financial burdens.

Some interviewees explained this responsibility with the traditional value of filial piety, which expected children to obey their parents and provide for the family. Others saw such responsibility as internalized goals as they entered the job market and sought independent lives. “I have already grown up and started working, so it will be a shame if I still ask them

for money when I should be making my own wealth,” said an interviewee who had taken several short-term jobs. Although all the interviewees were still financially dependent on their parents in some way, they felt responsible for ending such dependence, as a vital condition to define their adulthood. Such a notion of responsibility is likely shaped by both the social expectations for independent and hard-working adults to demonstrate filial piety and the neoliberal norm that required individuals to become self-responsible accumulators of human capital, who take care of themselves and work hard. The financial independence was thus often connected with the self-identity of the emerging adults, who believed that “to become a real adult is not about age, but about the ability to sustain your own life.”

To prove their identities as self-sustaining adults, the youth pursued financial independence in their professional expectations. It is important to notice that such independent lives hardly imply any significant decline in one’s living standards, especially the material standards. In other words, these Chinese youths aimed to create a similar standard of life by themselves after emerging from the universities and starting work, which, they believed, was increasingly difficult in this precarious era. “Taking care of yourself means living like yourself in your dependent life with your parents,” said an interviewee who lived in her parent’s house after college, “it is difficult for young people, especially in this poor general environment, so it should be done step by step.” Other interviewees also believed that they were responsible for maintaining a similar living standard, which was the necessary component of their financial independence, as proof of their fulfilled responsibility to become self-sustaining adults. My interviewees talked about shrinking opportunities for

employment, as well as the increasing life expenses, especially for those old enough to consider forming their own families and having children. An interviewee who was starting his second job in the year said that he could not imagine working in a different city without his family and paying for housing with his limited salary. “That's a very hard life, and there's no way out,” he said. Such “way” he talked about indicated future opportunities to achieve financial independence when such a goal is not affordable in the short term. Considering the severe peer competition in the labor market for limited adequate jobs, the wishes for independence can hardly come true without depending on financial assistance from their families for many years. After becoming disillusioned with their career prospects, the youth temporarily abandoned their desire to independently create an ideal life for themselves and become self-sustaining adults immediately, choosing instead to remain dependent on the living conditions provided by their parents and focus on long-term financial development. In this way, they did not have to accept the fall in living standards, while they could still fulfill their responsibilities as independent adults one day.

2.4 Long-term Employment against Labor Insecurity

Another issue during the reform was the increasing labor insecurity resulting mainly from the lack of effective legal protection for the workers (Kuruville, Lee, and Gallagher 2011). With an aim to terminate the entitlements of Maoist labor relations and promote flexibility, China's 1994 Labor Law negatively impacted Chinese workers, including the massive layoff of urban workers enabled by short-term labor contracts in the later restructuring, increasing insecurity and informalization, and frequent labor disputes and

conflicts (Kuruville, Lee, and Gallagher 2011, 41). Then, as a supplementary law to the 1994 Labor Law, the state passed the 2007 Labor Contract Law after a process of public comment and discussion about its draft. The new labor laws intended to establish a series of labor protections against the decreasing employment security with short-term contracts and labor informalization, but ineffective enforcement and implementation diminished such protection (Kuruville, Lee, and Gallagher 2011, 57). Such a lack of state protection had consequences on the labor conditions of Chinese workers. Even until the 2010s, only a few Chinese individuals worked under contracts, primarily short-term ones for one year or less (Friedman and Lee 2010). A majority of the labor force, especially the youth, commonly worked in informal jobs and internships in the case of fresh graduates, which offered very limited job security (Standing 2021, 76). As a result, companies can lay off their employees with little expense. Such layoffs were used as both a way to save labor costs in poor company performance and a means of penalizing inefficient employees. Moreover, the low wages and exploitive conditions of labor threatened the entire labor force, including people with contractual jobs. In this case, workers become human capital, who are jeopardized by various forms of exploitation and precarity and can be replaced by other individuals in any case necessary (Brown 2017, 37).

Almost all my interviewees shared anecdotes of poor labor conditions they experienced themselves or heard from others. University students in China typically participate in several career internships as preparation for their future professional paths. Thus, even the interviewees in schools provided first-hand examples of the labor precarity they experienced.

According to their experiences, frequent layoffs were still common for private companies in their cities, and any negative performance of the company might result in employees being suddenly laid off. “It is unacceptable to dismiss us for no reason,” an interviewee was angry about the insecure employment status, “then we will go back to the unemployment plight and face all the problems again.” Those who experienced such layoffs and had to reenter the competing labor market felt distressed, as they thought they had wasted their time and effort in a position with little prospects. They told me that they expected long-term career experiences that promise opportunities for both promotion of positions and self-improvement in terms of working competence. As their wishes for good independent lives could not be realized in the short term, my interviewees seemed to emphasize long-term career prospects, which could not be fulfilled by the insecurity of random layoffs in many private companies they described.

In contrast, the SOEs, according to my interviewees, could offer stability by enabling them to work for long periods and rarely get suddenly laid off. My interviewees believed that state-owned enterprises would hardly terminate their contracts with employees, especially not because of the poor business performance of the enterprise. It was worth noticing that none of my interviewees were working in SOEs during the research, and their ideas of SOE jobs could have various sources. Some interviewees heard it from their parents and older friends, while some learned it online from the shared experiences of others. Most of my interviewees believed that it was a customary view recognized by the entire society. “People say that state enterprises don’t have that pressure of bankruptcy to control the tiniest amount of cost, and

even if layoffs happen, it will be less frequent and sudden.” The large-scale and stable funding from the state might be a popular explanation among my interviewees about limited layoffs. Such a collective recognition might also indicate a certain nostalgia for the pre-neoliberal era in China, connecting the image of modern SOEs to their Maoist predecessors, which historically guaranteed the workers extreme job security with almost permanent employment. Although my interviewees did not live through that era, many of their parents grew up in SOE communities and neighborhoods. As most interviewees stated that parents were their primary source of SOE-related information, it was likely that such a nostalgia of state-assured long-term employment was passed with the knowledge of pre-neoliberal Chinese society to today’s youth.

Due to the frequent layoffs in private companies described by my interviewees, the opportunity to do the same job for a long time was seen as a precious quality in comparison. As a fundamental aspect of labor stability, the security of long-term jobs enabled my interviewees to seek other attributes of stability, such as gradual career development, future promotion, and formation of social ties with co-workers, which will be discussed in the later sections of this thesis. The most important function of such long-term jobs was to avoid the issue of unemployment once and hopefully for all. Some of my interviewees could not stop emphasizing their stress and despair about the unemployment crisis that they will shortly face. Constantly doing short-term jobs or getting laid off would force them to face the same difficulty of employment over and over again. “I hope I can deal with the unemployment nightmare and all its pressure only once, if I am lucky enough to find a stable job that I can

do for a long time, long enough for the general environment to improve,” an interviewee highlighted the necessity of long-term jobs in the current circumstance. Moreover, the future opportunity for promotion and higher income in long-term jobs also promised my interviewees chances to live a sufficient standard of life independently from their family's support. For these interviewees who took a long-term life plan for their career paths, working for a long period was also the foundation of all their goals and pursuits.

2.5 Stable Welfare and Labor Treatment

Another common experience of the precarity is poor labor treatment. An interviewee recalled a large local factory, where she interned for a research position for six months. There, even as a student intern, she worked six days a week, overtime every day with a very low salary. The factory provided all employees meals and dormitories, but she made fun of the quality of food and housing during the interview, saying that was “not even as good as the dormitory in her university,” which was already thought hardly acceptable. This interviewee addressed, again and again, the considerable scale of that company in her city, hinting that employees in smaller and less mature private companies may experience worse. Indeed, many other interviewees shared with me their experience of a gap between the ideal career they expected in college and the realistic workplace conditions they experienced during internships or at work. Mandatory overtime, poor working conditions, and harsh requirements for employees all make them anxious. Another frequently highlighted example was about social security and other long-term pensions and welfare. In modern China, an individual's social security, pensions, and endowment insurance are attached to their job, and companies

are required to pay for the social security fees for their employees. However, my interviewees have introduced me to various ways for employers to evade their duty. For example, the platform economy, such as platform ride-hailing and takeout delivery services, is very popular in modern China. As large numbers of Chinese youth flock into such emerging industries characterized by labor flexibility, they become the business platforms' independent contractors, who receive little welfare and labor protection. In other cases, my interviewees had to sign a statement provided by their employer, clarifying that they were "willing to give up social security and bear any future risks or consequences" before they could take a job. They felt that they had no choice due to the immense pressure of unemployment. Most commonly, the employers just don't pay for the social security and secretly take the fee for themselves. Seeking labor arbitration may help my interviewees terminate their employment contracts and receive a certain amount of compensation, but at that point, they will re-enter the volatile labor market and face unemployment all over again. Then, their previous positions will likely be taken soon by their peers, while every Chinese youth struggles between unemployment and lack of social welfare and long-term financial security.

In many cases, according to my interviewees, they could only find a job with "a too-bad-to-accept labor condition" and "too-high-to-fulfill recruitment standards for new employees." As educated youth with positive expectations of their future jobs, it is difficult for my interviewees to accept such situations of inadequate employment. When it comes to other friends' or relatives' job-searching experiences, my interviewees told more lurid stories about bogus labor contracts, deceptive companies, and all sorts of other pitfalls on their way to

pursuing an adequate career path. Besides having conversations with their friends, another major source of the stories of precarity is various Chinese online social media platforms like Weibo and Xiaohongshu, where the youth post their working anecdotes, complaining about the precarious environment with numerous anonymous young social media users. Out of fear of the unemployment crisis, the youth just starting their careers are often very concerned about negative news about labor precarity on those platforms. As a result, many choose their first job with extra caution, acting in a risk-averse way to avoid any potential forms of precarity. Such an attitude of risk aversion was commonly shared among my interviewees, who were fully aware of the difficulties they were facing if they hadn't overstated them. One interviewee told me while sighing, "I know I will one day adapt to these risks and insecurities after working for a while. However, if this is possible, I would still like to avoid these risks from the beginning, so there are no more concerns of unemployment." Many other interviewees also admitted that taking an inadequate job would be their last choice to consider, even though they understood the precarity of the labor market. In other words, instead of accepting the precarity of their employment like their peers, my interviewees held one relatively ideal image for their career path.

Such an ideal career image was further explained by the notion of stability, which was associated with the state-owned enterprises, instead of the private companies that bore various accusations from my interviewees about their poor labor conditions. In the "poor general environment" with significant precarity and all kinds of employment-related challenges, stability means a decent job with sufficient security, welfare, and other aspects of

labor conditions. More importantly, stability ensures that the emerging adults enjoy benefits in one company for a long period, rather than intermittently falling back into the crisis of youth unemployment. The SOEs in China had a historical reputation for providing sufficient welfare since the Maoist era, and such an image might remain influential even in today's China. Although many of my interviewees possessed limited academic knowledge about the transition and reform of SOEs before they were born, they learned such an image from their parents or the internet, inheriting the historical recognition of SOEs as welfare providers. In today's "poor general environment," the struggling youth valued long-term financial security from welfare more than ever, and thus some of them shared a common nostalgia for a state that ensured stability of people. At the same time, the most direct factor that shaped their expectations was the private companies and employers who provided little long-term security in the precarious economy that made today's SOEs still significant welfare providers in comparison. In this case, the precarity-related criticism was largely against the private companies and employers, who used exploitive business strategies and manipulated their workers. In contrast, the state might be associated with the positive image of the SOEs as stability providers. "SOEs are operated by the state, so the state will definitely provide me more reliable labor security and welfare according to its own standards," said an interviewee when she was comparing the private and state companies. "All those jobs are terrible because (private) companies don't follow the state policies about the labor conditions and welfare standards." The youth who sought SOE jobs seemed to consider the state as the one that set sufficient welfare standards, and they saw exploitive private companies as greedy

businessmen who caused the precarity. As a result, they pictured that SOEs as companies would follow the welfare standards set by the state as a way to fulfill the state's duty to protect workers. Once other economic crises and precarity happen again in the future, the youth can rely on the security and protection provided by the state through welfare only for SOE employees in the future.

2.6 Stability in Precarity

The basic characteristics of the notion of stability associated with SOEs are closely related to the labor conditions of the job. First, a stable job should allow employees to work in the company for a sufficiently long period, rather than penalizing the employees and exposing them to the labor insecurity of frequent layoffs. Second, a stable job must provide employees with satisfying labor conditions, including social security, stable working hours, and a decent working environment, so that they will not be forced to quit the job. These two standards of stability seem simple and ordinary for most job-seeking youth in the world, but my interviewees constantly emphasized them during our conversations. Such emphasis may result from the experience of the unemployment crisis and labor precarity in today's China. Understanding the severe problem of youth unemployment, my interviewees experienced significant stress when they aimed to fulfill their responsibilities as emerging adults to achieve financial independence. Since they pursued such independence while highlighting the creation of fine living standards as an element of their responsibilities, the youth sought long-term development in their career paths. The stable labor status thus enabled them to accumulate working experiences and personal income for a certain job in the long term,

rather than kicking them back into the precarious labor market. Also, the youth emphasized labor conditions like sufficient social security and proper working environment, because they experienced and heard about the poor labor conditions commonly provided in today's China by private companies. Within such an era of precarity described by my interviewees, they valued such long-term security more than any time, because they could rely on such security once they find themselves facing similarly precarious situations in the future. As a result, the youth expected SOEs to provide them such career stability. Although their knowledge and experience of the pre-neoliberal image of SOEs were limited, they still inherited a certain nostalgia from their families and society. They craved the abundant social security and secured employment, and they expected the SOE, representing the state's role as the caretaker of the employees, to provide such stability that allowed the youth to pursue their life goals, such as the achievement of success and the pursuit of life meanings through a less competitive way.

3. Pursuit of Success

3.1 Success: Personal Wealth and Sustainability

Despite the disappointment of their working experiences and fear of the youth unemployment crisis, my interviewees were not completely disillusioned about their professional prospects. They believed that they could avoid at least some issues of instability and insecurity from precarious jobs and exploitive employers by actively seeking stability. Once the SOEs granted them opportunities for long-term career development and financial

security, they could gradually fulfill their responsibilities to become self-sustaining adults with financial independence. The discussion about responsibility during the interviews often included the notion of personal success, which depicted the ultimate career goals of the youth. In this case, the pursuit and achievement of success was often considered a future part of their responsibility to fulfill after financial independence. After taking care of themselves, the youth planned to take care of their families in the future, creating sufficient living standards for their parents, spouses, and children. Some interviewees believed that success was separated from their responsibility to their parents, but they agreed that success would be the next pursuit after becoming self-responsible adults. Similar to the responsibility that highlighted financial independence and proper living standards supported by sufficient living expenses, success was also a notion that emphasized the creation of personal wealth. Many interviewees talked about their responsibilities to themselves and their families who supported them. Such responsibility, as they argued, was fulfilled by trying their best to seek personal success. Only then would they be able to live up to all the hard work they had been doing, and the expectations of their families. “They are without doubt many standards of the idea of success,” an interviewee emphasized, “but anyone agrees that money and job is a very large part of success, and many other parts depend on money and job.” As most of my interviewees agreed that the notion of success had multiple standards, in our conversations they typically emphasized career success and accumulation of wealth. Such a connection between material wealth and personal success was also a product of China’s neoliberal economic policies.

Contemporary Chinese emerging adults in the cities have adopted an individualistic notion of themselves, which promotes the pursuit of personal success through education under increasing burdens of responsibilities. The Chinese emerging adults grew up witnessing the neoliberal transformation and economic development of their country. Compared to the traditional model of Chinese individuals or the older generations who lived through the collective lives in the Maoist era, the modern emerging adults incorporate a clear notion of individualism, which led them to seek personal economic success in the increasingly competitive society. In traditional China, people celebrated collectivism, in which individuals were secondary to the group, such as their family or country. Thus, individuals were culturally and morally expected to obey and serve the group (Yan 2020, 179). As taught in the Confucian classic *The Great Learning*, the desirable way for one is to “cultivate self” (xiushen) to “harmonize their family” (qijia) and “govern well their states” (zhiguo). People’s Republic of China, once founded in 1949, severely opposed traditional Confucian ethics, but it further intensified collectivism in Chinese society by promoting communist virtues of impartiality and selflessness. The state encouraged people to devote their efforts to realizing communism and defined individual achievement in collective terms (Yan 2020). Such emphasis on collectivism was replaced in the 1990s when individualism emerged during the contemporary market-oriented economic and social transition (Yan 2012). The neoliberal reforms advocated mass consumption and consumerism, while privatization and marketization allowed people to make individual decisions to accumulate wealth, breaking the personal bondage to traditional arrangements (Zelizer and Dodd 2017).

Indeed, the meaning of success in today's China is primarily individualistic and materialistic.

In both public and private spheres, neoliberal ethics are embedded in China's traditional values, manipulating the individuals' responsibilities to the state and their families.

In the public sphere, the state encouraged individual wealth by connecting it with previously widespread collectivistic value. The famous slogan of the economic reform in the 1990s expressed the nation's expectations to achieve the ultimate purpose of "commonwealth" by stating that "those who become rich first will bring others to become rich later." This slogan incorporated clear neoliberal values that emphasized the trickle-down effect of accumulated personal wealth, and similar ideas were also common in Western neoliberal states like the United States. This slogan interprets individual wealth-making as a precursor to the common wealth-making of the entire population and the country as a whole, assuming the diffusion of individual wealth in society as an externality of wealth-making activities, rather than an act carried out by the rich on their initiative. The slogan skillfully used the collectivist ideology of the just-ended Maoist era to rationalize and justify huge private wealth, which was typically prohibited in collective lives. Instead, in the reforming era, according to another slogan, "to get rich is glorious." This slogan though similar to the famous slogan "to labor is glorious" in the Maoist era, points in a reversed direction and celebrates economic wealth at both state and individual levels. In television news and newspaper interviews, many wealthy members of China's new upper class used state slogans to rationalize their privileged status as glorious enterprising individuals who shared their wealth with society through the trickle-down effect. In contrast, those economically

disadvantaged members of society hardly used such terms. With a limited public voice in society, they existed silently under the glory of the rich, waiting for the social wealth that would never trickle down.

In the private sphere, according to Yan's data, personal and family happiness was routinely measured by their accumulation of material prosperity as the visible and quantifiable standard of not only commodity price but also well-being in the market economy (Yan 2018, 916). Here, numbers written in bank accounts and on paychecks constitute people's expectations of the present and future well-being of each other. Besides the state's emphasis on wealth-making, the causal connection between personal wealth and well-being was also a result of the state's withdrawal from social welfare provision. The neoliberal privatization of housing and the marketization of medical care, for example, enhanced the risks faced by individuals, advocating for them to accumulate personal wealth and prepare for the increasing uncertainties in a precarious economy (Yan 2012). Such risks were further enhanced by the one-child policy, which made the only member of the youngest generation provide for the entire family when they got old (Fong 2004). As a result, personal wealth became a necessary condition to practice traditional virtues like filial piety and family responsibility in the neoliberal era, and wealth-making was once again justified by traditional values. In this case, as Wendy Brown points out, individuals are doubly responsabilized by neoliberal transformation. On the one hand, the morality of the state expects individuals to participate in wealth-making by participating in the increasingly unequal and precarious economic environment. On the other hand, individuals have to fend and provide for

themselves as they become increasingly expendable and unprotected (Brown 2017, 134). The double responsabilization forms the Chinese version of Brown's discussion of homo oeconomicus who operates in a context replete with risk and contingency, while the Chinese state still expects its homo oeconomicus to behave in the competitive market logic that individual pursuits of wealth will unwittingly generate collective benefit (Brown 2017, 84). Similar to individuals in other neoliberal states, Chinese individuals are also responsible for establishing their human capital through self-investment, which, in the case of Chinese emerging adults, is primarily through education.

In our conversations, my interviewees showed outstanding interest in material wealth, as both one of the main determining factors of personal success and an essential responsibility to their families. Material wealth was a demonstration of their social status as self-responsible children of their middle-class parents, a sign of their success and ability to create happiness for themselves and their family, and their preparation for another precarious time after achieving financial independence. Most interviewees believed that the level of income was among their most important expectations for an ideal job. "One can expect many things from work, but we all work for money in the end," said an interviewee who just started looking for jobs after graduating. Like their peers, my interviewees also consider their income levels as both financial support for their consumption and social signals of their success. Some interviewees who just started short-term work felt ashamed to tell their parents about their monthly salary, which, according to them, did not match their ambition, as well as their college degree. Thus, he was concerned that his family would be disappointed or worried

about his life, even though his parents were always very supportive and cared about him. He told me that it was such care and love that made him more concerned because he wanted to live up to their and his own expectations, while the most convincing evidence for it would be his paycheck. For other interviewees, rather than expectations, they were more concerned for practical reasons. As many of my interviewees tried to live an individual life with considerable quality compared with their lives with their parents, they believed that enough independent income would be the key toward independence for true adults. However, as life expenses in large Chinese cities continued to rise, they found themselves still dependent on financial support from their parents, even after they started earning their own salaries. In this case, the measurement of personal success included the ability to achieve financial independence and take care of oneself, but in the end, such goals both require sufficient material wealth, which ideally comes from the first jobs of these emerging adults.

While emphasizing the importance of income, my interviewees valued the sustainability of income more than the short-term gains. They indeed pursue material wealth, but such wealth, according to many of them, should ideally be sustainable and support long-term life plans. "I would rather receive many small sums of money periodically from a long-term job than a large sum of money all at once from a short-term job," said an interviewee explaining how she understood sustainability. Of course, she found this assumption unrealistic, since short-term jobs did not usually bring in more income per unit of time. Yet, she tried to convey an idea shared by many interviewees that given the significant unemployment crisis, finding a stable source of long-term income is more important than pursuing short-term interest. "It is

responsible to invest for your future interest, since other responsibilities will come as we grow older and older." Such responsibilities indicated forming a new family and taking care of it while achieving self-development in terms of career promotions. The ability to constantly earn wages, rather than occasionally take short-term jobs, was also considered a sign of success, as one could always be prepared for risks and uncertainties in life with a stable source of income and livelihood. This is also a way for emerging adults to prove their abilities to take good care of themselves. Besides salaries, other financial benefits like pensions and social security were also sources of long-term security, since the responsibilities of China's emerging adults are to constantly take good care of themselves. Many of my interviewees highlighted the importance of social security, especially in the precarious labor market where they could find various companies refusing to pay for their social security. Since the social security fee paid by the employers is typically deducted from the income of employees, the high income and the high level of social security can have conflicts with one another. Most of my interviewees agreed that they would prefer the long-term security brought by stable social security in the future, rather than a higher wage level in the present. As a result, despite the urge to gain independence and prove that they could become independent adults immediately, most of the youth believed that seeking stable and constant long-term benefits would be the best way to fulfill their responsibilities.

The connection between material wealth and the sense of stability was meaningful. On the one hand, the high income level itself was hardly directly associated with stability. My interviewees believed that a stable job was not necessarily a very well-paid job, although it

must at least meet their basic standard of salary. “If a job is stable enough, short-term income level would not matter.” Some interviewees even saw a high salary as the opposite characteristic of the stability. “There are opportunities to get rich,” said an interviewee who tried to draw a comparison between short-term wealth and long-term stability, “but most of them are risky, so I would choose the stable ones although it may not pay me that much.” On the other hand, many interviewees expected a stable job to provide sufficient long-term financial income, because its promise of long-term work and opportunities for career development should allow gradual accumulation of personal wealth. As a result, the stability seemed to indirectly relate to high income in terms of prospects and space for professional self-investment, rather than the short-term financial gains. This understanding explains the youth’s plans of relying on parents in the short term and repaying their gratitude in the future. Moreover, the other aspects of financial success, such as long-term personal security and a stable source of income, were more directly explained as an attribute of stability. In other words, stability itself was seen as a sign of success. For the youth seeking SOE jobs, such long-term benefits were more important than the absolute value of salary, and their values for personal success adapted to the precarious environment. From a neoliberal perspective, seeking long-term career development also indicates continuous self-investment for a longer period to accumulate human capital and become a self-responsible labor force. The prioritization of future interest and security is thus in line with typical neoliberal societies, while modern Chinese youth, threatened by labor precarity and unemployment crisis, commonly choose to take long periods of effort to foster their human capital at a particular

job. However, these active accumulators of human capital did not subscribe to the ideas of entrepreneurialism, which was essential to neoliberal ideology. Rather, as the following sections will show, they contested the notions of risk-taking and competition in entrepreneurialism. The responsibility for Chinese youth was not to become entrepreneurial individuals, but to achieve their success simultaneously inside and outside the workplace.

3.2 Success: Family Expectations and Life Meanings

The emphasis on material wealth as a vital component of one's success and the responsibility to participate in long-term self-investment for career development together shaped the career preferences of my interviewees. In this case, they acted like the classic examples of neoliberal homo oeconomicus, especially when their interest in politics was very limited at the beginning due to the strict authoritarian control of political dissent in society. However, one must notice that the image of the self-responsible working individual in China emphasizes not only active self-investment in terms of human capital, but also self-caretaking and self-sustaining in terms of material living standards and mental health. In their pursuit of ideal career paths, the youth also valued such non-material components of success. By seeking meanings of lives outside the workplace and avoiding severe peer competition as human capital, the youth, with an aim for personal success, contested some characteristics of the ideal homo oeconomicus image imposed upon them by the neoliberal economy and the state.

During my conversations with my interviewees, the notion of responsibility was frequently associated with family. All of my interviewees had both their parents working, and

most of their families had relatively strong and close ties among family members.

Interviewees frequently showed their gratitude toward their parents. They are also concerned about their parents' health and stress. "They worked hard for decades to create my good life," said an interviewee about her parents, "so it is my responsibility to become worthy children, share the financial burden, and make them proud." These emerging adults wanted to support their aging parents as their only child in the future, when they could accumulate more material wealth. In these cases, the neoliberal morality of becoming self-responsible individuals with human capital is achieved by first becoming successful children who could take on the family responsibility. Such family responsibility is not only reflected at the material level. Becoming responsible children also requires one to provide emotional benefits to parents, such as making them proud, fulfilling their expectations, and showing a sufficient level of obedience. As a result, the attitude and expectations of the parents can largely shape the life plans and career choices of the children.

The parents of my interviewees had two types. Some parents had a clear idea of what kind of person their children should become, and the children might negotiate such future expectations with their parents. My interviewees with such parents tended to agree with their parents in most cases, especially the general career plans to seek long-term personal development. After all, these parents' ideas did not diverge significantly from their children. The second type of parents did not care about what specific paths their children would take. Yet, they remained supportive of their children, providing both resources and suggestions for the future personal development of the children. The interviewees with less concerned parents

also actively communicated their plans and ideas about employment and career paths with their parents, whose rich life experience and social networks can be instructive. Sometimes there might be disagreements between parents and children, but none of my interviewees felt that those conflicts in ideas were completely irreconcilable. As a result, almost all my interviewees had reached at least partial agreements with their families about their career choices and pursuit of long-term development to achieve individual independence without dramatically lowering their living standards. The parents typically recognized such a goal as a proper way to succeed and fulfill responsibilities as hard-working children. Thus, despite the aim for individual financial independence of the children, the entire family would prioritize the future professional potentials of the children, so parents were still willing to continue to offer support and advice as their children pursue their ideal jobs. Then, once the children have achieved their success, they will be able and responsible to fulfill the financial and emotional needs of their parents. In this way, the family responsibility of the youth is fulfilled with the help of their families.

Many of my interviewees agreed that it was not material success, but happiness that their parents expected them to achieve. “The best way to take care of myself may be to have a meaningful life,” an interviewee explained. Different individuals had different definitions of the notion of the life meaning. Most of my interviewees explained it as personal happiness, a sense of accomplishment, having control of their leisure time and schedules, and building connections with people around them. In the first two decades of their lives, my interviewees, with the care and support from their families, strived in China’s education system and worked

hard with all their peers. They agreed that they had had meaningful lives as children and teenagers. Then, as they became emerging adults and were ready to enter the labor market, they expected to find meaningful jobs, as an important demonstration of their personal success and responsibility to take good care of themselves mentally.

My interviewees believed that an ideal job could create meaning for their lives in both direct and indirect ways. In terms of direct creation of meanings, they referred to the pleasure and sense of accomplishment in finishing tasks and overcoming challenges at work. While a few interviewees still hoped to seek direct meaning in the workplace, many others told me that they had taken a more realistic view to accept the unlikelihood of their future work offering meaning. Such a negative expectation was derived from their experience of labor precarity and fear of the harsh environment of youth employment. Thus, many of my interviewees turned to another aspect of meaningful jobs, seeking jobs that could provide indirect meanings to their lives outside the workplace. Such indirect meanings came from fulfilling personal and family expectations about success, as well as allowing individuals to manage their leisure time.

In terms of success, as discussed previously, emerging youth are considered successful once they have ideal and adequate jobs that create material wealth, enable long-term career development, and qualify the youth as responsible and independent individuals. Such success can provide a huge sense of accomplishment. My interviewees also talked about the leisure time needed to develop their hobbies and accompany their friends and families; both of these being non-career sources of meanings in their lives. Yet, as they realized that jobs

increasingly require longer working hours and frequent overtime work, many interviewees pointed out the potential conflict between career success and non-career leisure. An interviewee who recently started an internship explained the balance of work and leisure time: “What you can achieve at work is an important thing, and your work also decides what you can do outside the workplace, which is another important thing.” In other words, the poor labor conditions and frequent overtime have another negative impact on the youth, whose creation of life meaning during their recreational time is replaced by frequent forced overtime at work. “The intensive work might take over my private time, then what remains in my life for decades is just work and more work, no interests and hobbies,” an interviewee shared with me his fear of the same boredom and exhaustion he once experienced in a company with mandatory overtime. In this case, becoming a tireless entrepreneurial self held little appeal for the Chinese youth. Instead, a balance between work and leisure was what they recognize as the way to take care of themselves. In this way, success can be realized both inside and outside the workplace, through the long-term career development and the achievement of meaning of life.

Moreover, many interviewees associated their meanings of life with forming bonds and relationships with people around them. Emerging adults taking full-time work, most commonly interact with their co-workers. Yet, once the labor market is flooded with precarious short-term jobs and employers that frequently lay off workers, such interaction between co-workers could hardly hold any deep meaning for my interviewees. Thus, some interviewees who have taken multiple short-term jobs complained that they had to continually

adapt to new environments and meet new people, but few of them would remain in their daily lives once they changed their jobs. “It’s very painful to deal with new coworkers every year,” said an interviewee who took several short-term jobs in the past two years. “This is the most scary part of unemployment. You won’t want to interact with others at work because you know you’ll soon be separated. At the office there is only work and after work it’s just you all alone.” For the youth, their peers as coworkers in the company are not potential competitors or enterprising individuals, but rather potential companions and friends. Thus, while their definition of success relies on the accumulation of individual wealth, this individualism does not transform them into ambitious competitors and entrepreneurial selves.

In contrast, stable jobs with fixed working hours and long-term employment provide considerable foundations for the youth to cultivate meaning in their lives. “Having a stable job will give me more control of my life,” an interviewee explained her expectations for life with stability. “Instead of being controlled by my work, I can decide for myself how to allocate my leisure time. I can go fishing, play sports, meet up with friends, or just spend a quiet afternoon alone.” The limited risk of dismissal also made long-term social ties in the workplace available, and my interviewees valued such precious chances to communicate with their coworkers, who were likely to spend the most time with each other. “Stability allows space for your life meanings. When you don’t have to find another job periodically or spend all weeks finishing tedious tasks, you will find ways to make you happy,” an interviewee concluded the connection between stability and the meaning of life, which was another important factor of personal success, and a standard for proper self-caretaking as responsible

individuals.

The emphasis on leisure time and stable working hours could sometimes result in the most outstanding conflict between my interviewees and their parents. According to my interviewees, their parents typically worked very hard in their youth with very limited material resources and family support during China's economic transition period. They often believed that it was their early hard work and toiling that enabled their children to enjoy sufficient resources, which made them successful and responsible parents. As a result, when their children started seeking more leisure and shorter working hours, some of the parents might hold an opposing view. Some interviewees told me that their parents criticized them for their sloth and timidity because their parents were less concerned about such short-term pleasure at the same age. A father taught his son that people should work harder in their youth, and only thus could they enjoy their later lives. "They say young people should work harder, like they did back then." Even though the parents cared about their children and wanted them to have better lives, many of them insisted that the youth must learn to get used to the toiling and hard work of life. Such ability to strive and endure was seen as a vital moral character and practical skill for a successful individual. My interviewees instead preferred a smoother path to their ideal success, especially when their parents could provide various forms of support, so they could avoid the extremely hard work once done by their parents. They told me that they were more concerned about avoiding unnecessary expenses of their efforts due to their understanding of contemporary labor precarity. "If the threat of the precarious general environment would make our efforts go to waste, perhaps toiling and

striving at all costs is not a good idea.” An interviewee told me that she assumed her parents emphasized toiling and enduring because it was how they could succeed. “But their experience might not be effective several decades later, and things have changed,” she said. Such a goal, they concluded, required clear plans more than aimless efforts. The youth typically see the avoidance of working overtime as a way to take care of themselves, as it allows them to keep healthy bodily and mentally. It was clear that the parents did not want their children to risk their health, but most of them insisted that their children had to be prepared for hard work and face its challenges.

Speaking of further striving and toiling in the upcoming stage of their lives as working individuals, my interviewees expressed complicated feelings. On the one hand, they refused to accept their parents’ critiques about their aversion to toiling as a form of sloth and timidity. They highlighted that they had been striving to study and take exams since the very early period of their lives, and their hard work in the past could prove their abilities to work hard and struggle to succeed. On the other hand, some of my interviewees claimed that it was such an experience of striving in China’s highly competitive education system that made them seek a career path with less toiling and more freedom to control their own lives. They explained that they once expected their hard work in schools could lead them to an easier future with ideal jobs and considerable income after they graduate. Such hard work for years, as the interviewees said, should allow them to accumulate enough human capital and personal ability to seek success in a bright career future. Yet, such a promising prospect vanished in the current precarious labor market.

Some interviewees also explained the reason for their active avoidance of hard work. They said that they were tired of the endless peer competition and intensive toiling that ended up bringing nothing but disappointment and further competition. By saying this, they were referring to their disillusioned expectation of studying hard, graduating from good universities, and finding a good job. They liked to share their experience of education competitions and hard work in schools. At that time, when they competed with numerous peers by striving harder and harder, they were promised future career prospects and opportunities for success after graduation. Most of my interviewees followed this path as they grew up as hard-working students until they realized the broken promise of education for future success at the very end of their college lives. “I’m only in my twenties, but I’m just so tired of the competition that just gets you nowhere,” said an interviewee who graduated from one of China’s top-rank universities. As a result, to understand the youth’s avoidance of hard work and expectations for ideal jobs, one must explore the youth’s experience of previous strivings in terms of education.

3.3 Cost of Success: Education, Competition, and Involution

The expanding and increasingly competitive education system is the primary place for the self-investment of contemporary Chinese emerging adults, who are urged to seek personal success and career prospects. In the continuous process of studying hard and struggling to enter better schools, emerging adults accumulate essential human capital that is expected to determine their career path and thus personal success. Education has been a central social mechanism in China for people to achieve class mobility and social status for over a thousand

years. Ancient Confucian classics like *The Great Learning* (Daxue) teach people to “cultivate themselves” (xiushen) until they “extend their knowledge” (zhizhi), which enables one to rise to a high social and political status to "harmonize the clan" and "well govern the state". While traditional values emphasize the practicality of education and its role in social mobility, modern Chinese society regards education as the primary way to accumulate human capital in competition, and the old ideas of self-cultivation take the form of self-investment in the neoliberal context. As one of the "four modernizations" highlighted by Deng Xiaoping, the education system of China experienced significant expansion during the Chinese economic reform (Harvey 2005, 120). The gross enrollment in tertiary education will reach 58 percent by 2021 (Feng et al. 2023). When the expanding education system in China promises upward mobility and opportunities in the precarious economy, education, as a form of long-term self-investment, is directly associated with a decent job and personal wealth, and parents start investing in their children’s education from childhood. As Yunxiang Yan argues in his neo-familism theory, as a result of limited economic and social security after the neoliberalization, modern Chinese neo-familism focuses on the youngest generation spiritually and materially, redistributing the majority of family resources to fulfill the needs of the children, especially in terms of education (Yan 2018).

Today’s Chinese emerging adults grow up with their urging parents and personal aspirations, striving to find their positions in that system. They typically study overtime, preparing for exams and attending cram schools on the weekends, devoting their spare time to this continuous self-investment of studying. Studying hard and struggling for good grades

have defined the experiences of most Chinese students in their earliest stages of life. In the National College Entrance Examination commonly abbreviated as Gaokao, high school students in the entire country compete for very limited admissions from top-ranked Chinese universities solely by the grade on one set of exams. All universities in China are categorized into multiple ranks by the state according to the expected quality of education for companies and employers to vet the educational background of job applicants. However, competition is exacerbated by China's large population base and small number of top universities. Thus, Chinese high schools, as public institutions fully funded by the state, were responsible for pushing their students in the competition for education.

Chinese high schools came up with various slogans to encourage their students to study harder and harder, including the famous one saying "One point raised, 1,000 competitors beaten" (tigao yifen, gandiao qianren). This slogan means that if a student can improve their total Gaokao score by one point, their ranking among all students in the entire country will be raised by thousands or even more, so that they will have a better chance of entering the top universities. In the modern Chinese language, the term "gandiao" is more commonly the cryptic saying of terms like "kill" or "beat up" rather than simply "defeat," which points out the fierce competition in education perceived by both the students and the high schools. The competitive nature of education also implicitly hinted at the severe consequence of failing to enter highly ranked universities as to be "beaten" by peers in the competitive economic environment and job market. Similar slogans are typically written on the red banners hanging on the walls of every classroom of every high school, turning the space of learning into a

place of competition, and classmates into competitors who are meant to beat one another. As such emphasis on personal struggle and success in the fierce competition iterated in the daily experiences of high school students, equality ceased to be the presumed natural relation among these competing teenagers (Brown 2017, 38). Such slogans were often very appealing to the students, who were to take the future-determining exam that they had prepared through years of studying hard. Every year, in the school pep rallies on the eve of the Gaokao, students shout out similar vows to express their ambition to win the upcoming competition or just the courage to face it. The harsh competition during the establishment of human capital illustrates Wendy Brown's argument that neoliberal homo oeconomicus constructs human capital in competitive positioning that aims to enhance their monetary and nonmonetary portfolio value across all their endeavors (Brown 2017, 10). In the Chinese context, such enhancement happens in explicit forms of direct competition, which deeply influences emerging adults from the early period of their lives. In its expanding education system, the state promotes such practices of long-term self-investment and competitive positioning.

The human capital established during long and competitive education does not necessarily guarantee personal wealth and career success. Shelly Robinson and Patrice Buzzanell point out the "golden ticket" paradox of tertiary education, which depicts hopeful economic narratives of guaranteed employability and career success. This paradox suggests that achievement in higher education, which results from educational competition, implies advantages for individuals in the following labor competition, which incorporates clear neoliberal characteristics (Robinson and Buzzanell 2024, 8). However, as the population

becomes increasingly educated, the job market is thus increasingly competitive, and degrees no longer lead directly to decent jobs. Chinese emerging adults also face a similar "golden ticket" paradox, since the expanding education system failed to fulfill the career expectations of individuals, who are promised success and wealth after graduating. Instead, many educated emerging adults find themselves troubled by inadequate employment, in which they fail to find satisfying jobs with sufficient salary to match their career prospects. According to Günter Schucher, inadequate employment remained a problem since the neoliberal reform adopted market mechanisms to regulate the labor system. However, modern inadequate employment is emphasized when China's expanding tertiary education sector fails to match the students' advanced skills and techniques with the relatively slow growth of high-salary technical jobs (Schucher 2017). In other words, Chinese youth who increasingly receive higher education tend to have higher career aspirations and more specialized skills, but jobs that fulfill such aspirations remain limited in the job market. Thus, Chinese youth face increasing mismatches between workers and jobs, leading to current inadequate employment and job informalization (Florida 2010). In modern China, one-third of fresh college graduates work in a job unrelated to their primary field of study. Although some people delayed their entry into the labor force to prepare themselves through graduate school, studies show that unemployment actually rises with educational attainment due to the mismatch (Schucher 2017). As discussed previously, education, as the primary form of self-investment for emerging adults, is highly costly in terms of time and endeavor for Chinese emerging adults. Hard work and sacrifice may have earned them the qualifications and skills through education, but the labor market

does not absorb those educated individuals as human capital, significantly striking their career aspirations. Once again, the Chinese context proves Wendy Brown's argument about human capital's precarious position. Regardless of success in self-investment as hard-working students, the Chinese emerging adults, as human capital for neoliberal firms and states, have no guarantee of security, protection, or even survival (Brown 2017).

In our conversations, my interviewees told vivid personal stories about their anxiety and exhaustion as striving students competing with others, as well as their disappointment and disillusionment as confused emerging adults. As the labor market failed to provide the labor security and prospects promised by education, they started questioning the meaning of their striving. Similar to other modern Chinese youth, my interviewees frequently used the term “involution” (*nei juan*) to describe all the efforts they took that turned out to become meaningless and unhelpful. In the Chinese context, the term usually has a negative connotation. It is used by today's Chinese people to describe a collective tragedy in the form of an arms race within a group or a generation of people. The involution takes place when individuals compete for very limited social resources, such as education and employment. As peer competition becomes more intense, everyone is forced to put in more and more effort to outperform others, and the rewards for such effort don't increase in turn. In the end, the involution costs everyone more, whether they are winners or losers of the competition. Few interviewees could claim that they never experienced such an involutionary competition, especially in terms of education. They clearly recognized the reality of constant involution in the education system and resented it. An interviewee with a determined expression told me,

“Participating in an involutionary competition would make you pay for increasing efforts and hard work endlessly, as you can never predict how much more you have to strive to beat out all the competitors. This is the only way you get the college degree or job position you want.” Moreover, he also talked about the pain of believing that he was paying all the extra effort in vain. “Such intensive involution is meaningless, and it is never really necessary for your actual goals.” In fact, as winners of the educational competition and university graduates, my interviewees indeed failed to see how their efforts paid off to create better career prospects for them due to the unemployment crisis. Such disappointment enhanced their aversion to the involutionary competitions, which would likely take place again for them in the labor market.

While involution could involve the entire generation of Chinese youth in the labor market, it could also take place on a smaller scale. Some interviewees recalled their struggles in high school when they were forced by the pressure to enter proper universities to compete with the classmates they interacted with every day. Even in universities, many interviewees encountered peer competition over limited guaranteed graduate school spots and on-campus awards. My interviewees accepted the necessity for competition, but they felt that the ubiquitous involution made competition more intense while preventing them from building strong emotional ties with people around them. While promising an opportunity for success that was later proven illusionary by the precarious labor market, the involution also destroyed other opportunities for their meanings of life, such as the time spent with others to create meaningful social ties. For hard-working students who spent most of their days in school, their networks of interpersonal relationships were largely built among their classmates and

schoolmates. As they explained that such interpersonal ties consisted of a vital part of their lives' meaning, some of my interviewees reported feelings of anxiety and insecurity when they tried to interact with peers and classmates with significant competitiveness. One interviewee told me that while she made friends in her class, there were also students who refused to take friendly attitudes or provide mutual help to their classmates. Another interviewee believed that such individuals with extreme competitiveness were the minority within a class, but he also wondered if competition among co-workers would be more intense when he started working. After all, when co-workers finish similar tasks in a company, time will become an important factor in comparing individual performance, which further determines one's opportunity for future promotions. At the same time, while the students within the same high school class had to compete with all their peers in the Chinese education system, the employees in a company were the only competitors for their co-workers. As a result, even if the company does not force its employees to work overtime, the pressure for career development and promotion will still promote increasing working hours as another form of involution at work. Besides labor market competition with a large range of their peers, such workplace competition also bothers my interviewees, who value their spare time and their emotional ties with others.

After recalling the hard work and avoidance of more future toiling, my interviewees explained the last attribute of the stability of SOEs. Stability means limited peer competition and a friendly working environment in terms of not only proper labor conditions but also inclusive and peaceful coworker relationships. My interviewees aimed to prevent the

involutions they experienced from repeating in their future lives, and they wanted to form social ties with their coworkers. In this case, the term “stable” is used to describe the relations between working individuals, rather than between employees and the company. Such peaceful relations, however, are available only in companies that put limited pressure on employees to foster workplace competition and further involution. Otherwise, involutory competition will penalize inefficient workers, while each individual has to pay extra labor to prove their efficiency. My interviewees believed that SOEs generally had lighter workloads for their employees because they were funded by the state and had limited concerns about going bankrupt. Thus, the company did not have to stimulate the productivity of employees by promoting workplace involution. Moreover, as SOE employment was generally considered a long-term job, my interviewees believed that workers would have more incentives to get along with each other because the coworker relationships could also be long-lasting. Additionally, as the avoidance of involution saved spare time for workers, the pursuit of leisure time and life meanings of my interviewees would also be realized, when they could focus on their hobbies and social ties outside the workplace. In this case, although the youth internalized the neoliberal goal of long-term self-investment in terms of career prospect and material success, some of them were actively contesting the neoliberal code of personal conduct as enterprising individuals or competitive homo oeconomicus. Rather, such career development was expected to be sustainable and gradual, balancing the accumulation of human capital, the maintenance of material and mental living standards, and the realization of the meaning of life.

4. Conclusion: Stable Job and Stable Life

A stable job is considered to have characteristics including long-term employment, reliable social security, proper labor conditions, and limited competition and involution. Due to their experience of struggling in China's precarious labor market, the youth pursue stability in their career preference as ideal solutions to challenges imposed by neoliberal economic policies and the unemployment crisis. With significant issues of unemployment and inadequate employment, the youth seek long-term working opportunities, so that limited layoffs enable them to gradually accumulate career skills and experiences for future promotions. Thus, they do not worry about returning to the competitive labor market and wasting their career prospect in short-term work. As the increasingly precarious labor conditions result in limited financial security and exploitive labor treatment, the SOEs' stability offers sufficient support for social security and stable working hours. When the youth are tired of endless involution and competition that extend from the education system to the labor market and workplace, stability provides a friendly working environment and limited workload. The precarity of the "poor general environment" has shaped the career choices and expectation of the youth, who no longer pursue monetary and non-monetary human capital at any cost and define their success only in terms of wealth. Rather, they value long-term sustainability and meanings of lives, depicting themselves as future creators of their happiness and adequate standards of living.

Today's Chinese youth bear the responsibility of becoming not only productive human capital and self-investing employees, but also caretakers for their own lives and independent

children of their parents. To fulfill such a responsibility shaped by both traditional expectations and neoliberal influences, the youth, though still internalizing the notion of success in terms of personal wealth, also achieve meaningful lives by enjoying their leisure time and forming intimate social ties with others. They avoid pointless toiling in the endless cycle of involution and competition, rejecting the exploitation of their time, effort, and personal meaning. My interviewees, based on their and others' understanding of the SOEs, believed that the stability of SOEs will eventually grant them stability in their lives. Thus, as they can gradually accumulate long-term career development as a form of self-investment and material wealth as a sign of success, the youth could overcome obstacles on their way to becoming responsible adults with financial independence and proper living standards. Then, they will also take on the family responsibility as successful children of their parents, as well as the future providers of the family.

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