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**Headline: Lights out at 9pm: China's firms push back against 996 culture**

### **Lights out at 9pm: China's firms push back against 996 culture**

Chinese companies are imposing various measures to stamp out toxic workplace culture and overcompetition, which officials have warned fuels the rat race.



**SINGAPORE:** Could one of the world's most overworked countries finally be seeing some much-needed change in the workplace?

Following recent pledges by Chinese government officials to combat overcompetition and tackle the brutal "996 work system" - the expectation of working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week - Chinese firms and companies have been stepping up, implementing official measures to encourage employees to leave work on time.

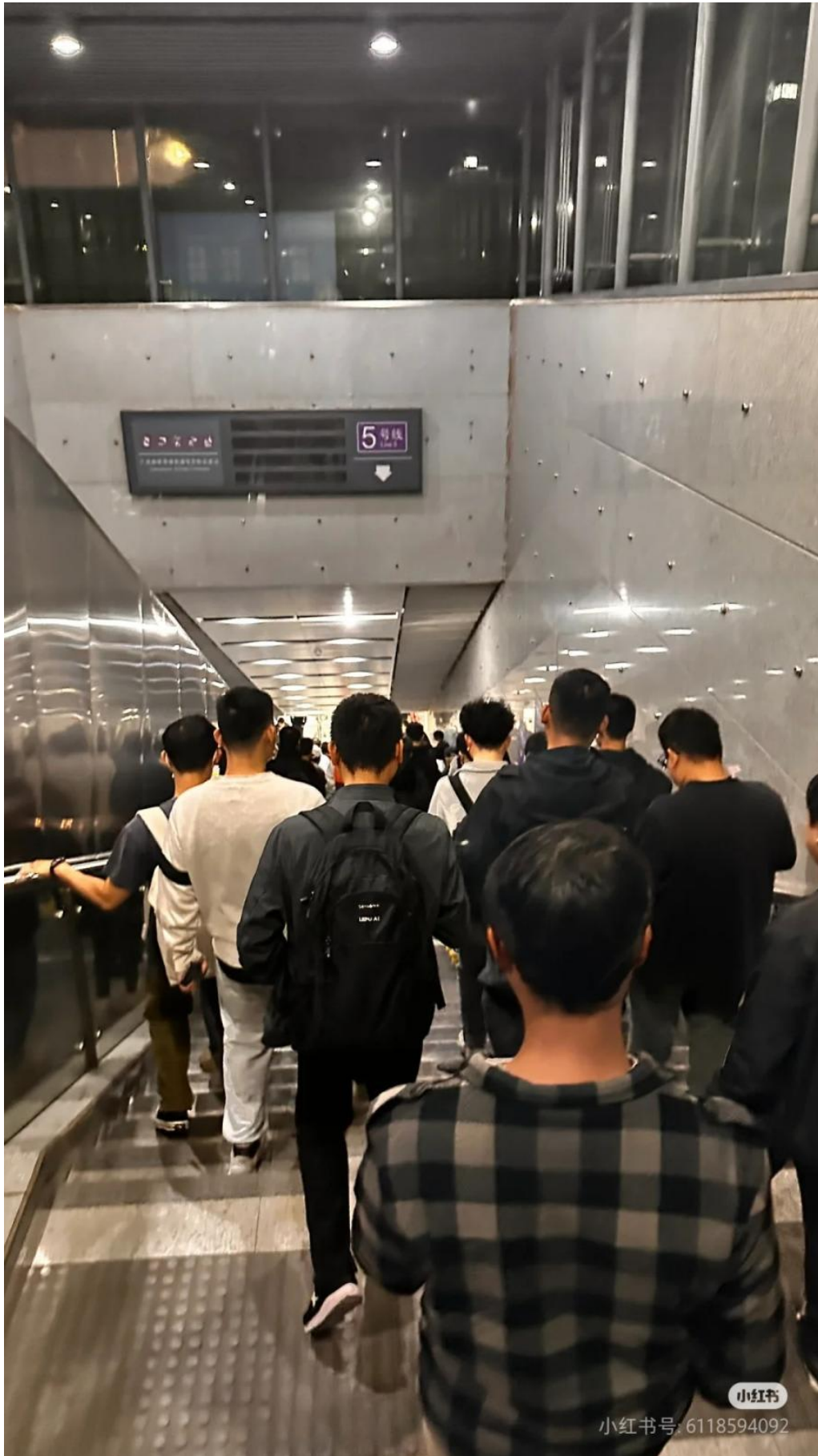
DJI, a drone manufacturing company headquartered in Shenzhen, is requiring all employees to leave the office by 9pm, a strict policy reinforced by managers and HR that has been generating debate online.

Long hours and working overtime remain prevalent in many Chinese industries, notably manufacturing, finance and China's hyper competitive tech sector - and while some might argue that 9pm is still a late sign-off time, many have welcomed the move and praised these early efforts as a step in the right direction.

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Sharing his personal experience on the Xiaohongshu social media app, a DJI software engineer who has been working at the company for the past four years, said the new measures - launched on Feb 27 - were "big news" for the company.

"I still remember how clocking off after midnight was the norm," he wrote, adding that ride-hailing drivers who picked him up at early hours of the morning, would often mistake him for rushing to make an early morning flight, rather than heading home from work.

"From today, (working overtime) is history," he said. "Clocking off on time at 9pm (means) I no longer have to worry about missing the last train, or waking up my wife when I get home."

Another DJI employee in Shenzhen, with the handle lookrlookr, recounted how she had recently been chased out of the office "for the first time", even though she was merely collecting a bag she left behind.

"A mandatory clock-off time is normal," she said, adding that there should be "less overtime".

At DJI's Shanghai office, lights are reportedly switched off every day at 9pm to remind workers that it is time to sign off and head home.

Others that also recently introduced anti-involution measures include popular Chinese retailer Miniso.

In an internal memo circulated in mid-February, CEO Ye Guofu announced new rules: Meetings should not last more than 30 minutes, approvals should not take overnight to process, and the use of PowerPoint is strictly prohibited.

Chinese appliance giant Midea Group now mandates all employees to clock off work by 6.20pm and bans meetings after working hours and "unnecessary overtime".

Writing in response to recent government calls to crackdown on workplace involution, Xiaomi founder and CEO Lei Jun voiced his full support.

"We must oppose involution and firmly adhere to high-quality development," he wrote on his official WeChat account.

"We must firmly advance towards high-end development, highlighting differentiation and personalisation, and consistently follow the path of high-quality development."

#### "DARK SIDE" OF NEIJUAN CULTURE

Li Wendong, an associate professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Department of Management, told CNA that Chinese companies were starting to see the "dark side" of neijuan culture and the downside of continuously working long hours.

"There is the assumption that because you work long hours, your productivity will be much higher ... but people (have) started to observe this may not necessarily be the case," Li said.

"Even if you work for a very long time, (it doesn't) necessarily mean your productivity is good."

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Chinese tech tycoon Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba, once famously said that it was “a blessing” for workers to be part of the cutthroat 996 work culture and that the economy was “very likely to lose vitality and impetus” without it.

Those who enjoyed their work would not find the 996 practice to be an issue, Ma had said back in 2019.

Public debate has intensified amid reports of multiple overwork-related deaths.

For the first time in its highly-anticipated annual work report, the Chinese government addressed the issue of “neijuan-style competition”, saying “comprehensive steps” would be taken “to address rat race competition”.

“We will move faster to develop and improve foundational institutions and rules for this purpose,” Chinese Premier Li Qiang said on Mar 5.

“The fact that the term appeared in the report clearly indicates strong concern (by the Chinese government) over this negative phenomenon,” Dr Chen Bo, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore’s East Asian Institute, previously told CNA, adding he remained hopeful that more measures on the part of companies would be introduced in the months to come.

#### LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Could the tide finally be turning for overworked employees in China? Or are recent changes short-term and merely for show?

Major Chinese corporations moving to combat toxic workplace practices signals a positive step in the right direction and “a useful starting point”, experts told CNA, but real changes will take time - and senior management must continue to remain supportive in order for change to truly be effective.

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Competition is important but excessive competition is unhealthy, said Dr Paul Lim, senior lecturer of organisational behaviour and human resources at Singapore Management University (SMU).

If the Chinese government takes a serious view towards clamping down on the 996 system, then improvements on the part of companies and managers will be seen, Dr Lim said.

“However, any edict passed should be clearly explained in a clear manner, with consultations with industries and young adults, lest well meaning intentions be misunderstood by the workforce.”

In every office, there might be some who choose to work overtime voluntarily, said CUHK's Li - potentially creating pressure for other employees to do the same.

“Because my boss is working, how could I leave? My coworkers and peers are all still there and are not leaving,” Li said, adding that it was crucial for managers to abide by the new regulations and set good examples.

“Leadership is also important. You are supposed to lead as a role model - if you can't balance working life, how can you expect employees to (do the same)?”

When asked about recent anti-involution and 996 measures introduced by companies, Dr Lim described the moves as “positive” but noted that it would take time for a new working culture to be normalised and widely accepted.

“Incentives or mandatory shutting down of the office may be implemented but if managers continue to expect staff to work away from the office after hours, it is just moving the work outside of the office and nothing changes,” he adds.



Leaders and management will need to dig deeper to find out root causes for why employees are working overtime, Li said.

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Creating opportunities for skills development and training, along with rewards such as promotions, could help employees "thrive and realise their potential" - ultimately reducing workplace competition and eliminating the need to "fight with each other", Li adds.

Li believes that any organisation which does not prioritise work-life balance or benefits like medical expenses will almost certainly develop a bad industry reputation over time.

"It sends a very bad signal to the market that the company does not care much about employees and their health and well-being," he adds. "It will reflect (badly) in the company's bottom line."

Dr Lim believes that companies take anti-involution measures in part "to attract and retain Generation Z employees".

"As for whether bigger firms will follow suit, it is purely up to them to see if such measures are beneficial for their context," he said.