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Why We (Don't) Want to Zhao Gongzuo – A Chinese Undergraduate's Perspective on Work in Everyday Speech

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This work is about the lived lexical ambiguity of gongzuo (work/job) for specific groups of Chinese undergraduates. Through my discussion with my Chinese undergraduate friends, I identify how the ambiguous wording to describe gongzuo in our daily talk is closely related to our deeper anxiety about how we wish to live our lives. By examining the tension between the contradicting meanings of those ambiguous concepts, I reveal why we see gongzuo as providing a solution to our anxiety but an unsatisfying one, which in turn explains our paradoxical feeling of necessity and reluctance to find jobs. In my ethnography, I argue that the anthropological approach to 'work/job' needs not only be a structural one, but also a micro and practical one to understand the lived nuances and anxiety about 'work/job' and to provide insights for real actors to resolve such anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to say 'zhao gongzuo (找工作)?'

Its literal translation is 'seeking job', 'zhao (找)' meaning 'seeking', and 'gongzuo (工作)' meaning 'job' or 'work'. Like the English word "work," gongzuo can be both a noun and a verb, and it carries a similar vagueness. Among Chinese undergraduates, zhao gongzuo is a familiar, almost unquestioned phrase. We all seem to know what it means - and that we're supposed to be doing it. The pressure is constant: Posts on social media about the anxiety of not receiving offers, friends frustrated by their internship applications, annoying relatives 'caring' about your career plans, robocalls marketing their job-seeking websites, and the employability index in university rankings.

In this context, 'gongzuo' appears to mean work

as specifically waged labour for us. The pressure of *zhao gongzuo* - the ambient employment anxiety - seems inescapable. Yet I'm pretty sure most of us don't want to zhao gongzuo, but are still unsettled by this pressure. The co-existing feelings of necessity and resistance to zhao gongzuo are difficult to explain, which suggests that there is something unrevealed about how we perceive 'gongzuo', where the word and the act itself seem to be normalised.

With the hope of explaining or even finding a way to resolve the discomfort arising from the pressure of zhao gongzuo, I went on to chat with my friends about zhao gongzuo and the conceptualisation of gongzuo. We are all 'regular' Chinese undergraduates, some studying overseas like me, others in China - we are 'regular' in the sense that there are no outstanding precarious situations in our families waiting for us to resolve, which means material necessity is not our main source pressure regarding zhao gongzuo. Through my conversations with friends, I discovered a few hidden assumptions underlying the discourse of zhao gongzuo, indicating how we understand gongzuo and how it relates to our uncertain futures. These assumptions present themselves as lexical ambiguities that are often overlooked by both anthropological theories of work and the general public. I argue that these ambiguities are central to understanding the tension between necessity and resistance to zhao gongzuo felt by us.

WHAT IS GONGZUO?

"Less time to have fun," Duza replied, as I asked her what her first impression is when imagining herself 'zhao dao gongzuo' (找到工作, succeeding in finding a job).

"Most people's gongzuo is not what they enjoy, but just a means to make a living," Long answered, as I asked what he first thought of when speaking of 'gongzuo' in 'zhao gongzuo'.

"If I had enough money - I wouldn't zhao gongzuo. I would do things that I am enthusiastic about"

Lindsey said, when I asked whether she would still gongzuo if someone suddenly gave her a billion RMB.

"If I succeeded in finding a gongzuo, my first thought would be 'I don't want to gongzuo'. I want to enjoy my life without gongzuo," Kumo said.

To be fair, I wouldn't want to gongzuo if I had a billion to spend. For both my friends and me, our understanding of gongzuo is primarily negative - something painful, to be avoided, an antithesis of life as leisure. But most of us seem to share the consensus that we need to gongzuo. To work is a self-evident norm - it is to live (Harris 2007: 137).

A preliminary and shared conceptualisation of gongzuo by us would define it as something necessary but never desirable. This connotation resonates with anthropological and sociological critiques of 'work' as waged labour in a Western, late-capitalist, post-industrial context, which is experienced as obligatory yet meaningless or harmful (Frayne, 2015; Graeber, 2019; Weeks, 2011).

I had warned myself that there is no generic concept of 'work' that can apply to different cultures (Harris 2007: 142), and that I should not let the 'Western' concept of waged labour in the literature drown out the nuance in our Chinese

individual experiences of gongzuo. Still, the conversations struck me much harder than I anticipated, where I found the theories to be hardly useful in explaining our experiences. This 'mismatch' is not simply a cultural difference. Although specifying their critiques to waged labour as grounded in particular historical and cultural contexts, these scholars still assume a semantic clarity of 'waged labour' - namely, it is assumed that there is a coherent and identifiable set of 'waged labour' that can be the target of critique.

In contrast, in the conversations with friends and my reflections, I noticed that the understanding of 'gongzuo' is much more fragmented and never presents itself as a stable or unified category. For Chinese undergraduates, gongzuo in zhao gongzuo evokes certain restraints, assumptions and judgements, which differ from speaking of gongzuo in general. But these differences are rarely acknowledged consciously in our daily language. This hard-to-notice difference became explicit even just at the beginning of our conversations, when I asked my friends whether they had the pressure of zhao gongzuo. They always gave me a straight yes or no, without questioning what gongzuo exactly is. But when we came to the question of 'what is gongzuo', they always paused and hesitated to give me a definite answer. In this respect, I think, theories grounded in capitalist and post-industrial critiques of waged labour, while helpful for understanding some aspects of gongzuo as waged labour in a post-industrial China, still fail to capture the lived ambiguity and vagueness of gongzuo.

I argue that understanding the subtle ambiguity of different usages of 'gongzuo', is key to explaining our anxiety and confusion when facing the necessity of zhao gongzuo and the perceived meaninglessness of gongzuo.

Compared to a structural and historical analysis that most formal theories use to approach the values of work, I want to look at the atemporal but more vividly lived present to understand work for us.

GONGZUO - WENDING

"Do you have pressure to zhao gongzuo?" At the start of our chat for my project, I asked my friend Kumo, who is currently a third-year undergraduate.

"I don't. I am the type of person who doesn't want to gongzuo in the future," Kumo replied.

"What do you mean by 'doesn't want to gongzuo'? Then what else are you going to do in your future?" This question was not raised for any anthropological concern. It just flowed out, I didn't even pause to think twice.

Facing my confusion about her phrase of 'not gongzuo', Kumo explained that she "didn't mean to not gongzuo completely". What she means by 'not gongzuo' is to exclude a specific type of job: "a wending (稳定) office gongzuo - that requires you to go to a fixed place and work for 8 hours". The adjective 'wending', roughly translated as stable, constant or fixed, is a feature frequently brought up by both me and my friends in our conceptualisation of gongzuo. Kumo said the gongzuo she would consider instead are those that "allow more freedom", like a part-time or short-term job with more freedom in time, in order to support her future plan to live a semi-nomadic lifestyle financially. In contrast to the job she wants to do that emphasises 'freedom', 'gongzuo' in zhao gongzuo is a distinct type of waged labour, which exerts control over the worker's own time in a more neatly disciplined way and requires

long-term dedication, described by the adjective wending. In this respect, wending denotes fixedness and restriction, and the wending-ness of gongzuo is treated as an undesirable feature that needs to be endured. Associated with one's belongingness and control of time, this wending-ness of gongzuo speaks to the capitalist abstraction of time as a discipline for work: where one's time can be bought by their employer, and the salary is a justification to exploit the workers (Thompson, 1967; Graeber, 2019: 84-92).

This concept of wending is also emphasised by Lindsey, but in a positive manner that makes gongzuo a necessity for one's life. Lindsey is currently a second-year undergraduate studying a humanities subject in the UK which she is passionate about, but she has planned to zhao gongzuo in the financial sector after graduation to stay in the UK - a gongzuo she does not see as meaningful in itself. Lindsey told me that she has zhao dao gongzuo, so she is now free of the anxiety of zhao gongzuo. I couldn't understand her statement about 'zhao dao gongzuo' as someone who is still studying but not working. Lindsey explained that what she meant was that she had succeeded in finding a summer internship. Considering that the internship has a high conversion rate to a full-time offer, Lindsey thinks she has more or less zhao dao gongzuo. Succeeding in finding an internship suggests a 'predictable future' for her that allows her to actually get a gongzuo, which in turn suggests wending. She explained her association of wending with gongzuo in terms of gongzuo as a stable source of income, allowing economic independence. In contrast, Lindsey described zhao gongzuo as a non-wending status, suggesting a deep sense of uncertainty for her future, which caused pressure. In this respect, wending is a desirable and necessary status denoting certainty in life, and 'gongzuo' is associated with wending by being this source of certainty. But it should be noted that, this certainty of gongzuo exists only when a stable source of income is present, which usually comes hand-in-hand with the undesirable aspect of wending, as I explained above. Lindsey specified that, gongzuo in zhao gongzuo is wending waged-labour with a long-term prospect. Thus, part-time and short-term jobs, mentioned by Kumo, are also excluded from gongzuo by Lindsey, for they cannot ensure wending-ness, either in a negative or a positive understanding.

GONGZUO, AND KNOWING WHAT TO DO WITH ONE'S LIFE

Not only is a certain type of waged labour assumed to be gongzuo in zhao gongzuo, but certain judgements are also made about the concept of zhao gongzuo itself. Long, a second-year undergraduate who wants to establish his own enterprise, pointed out that he would not use the phrase of zhao gongzuo. He describes zhao gongzuo as a "passive act, unlike (the phrase of) 'seeking/pursuing a career' which is more active". The passive/active distinction here is used metaphorically. For Long, the passivity of zhao gongzuo lies in its motivation. Long thinks that most young Chinese engage in zhao gongzuo simply because of being directionless about their life: "They do not know what to do with their lives; they are directionless". In contrast, 'pursuing a career' is out of a dedicated aspiration, with a clear understanding of what one is going to do to construct a desirable future. He also pointed out how his personal understanding of gongzuo differs from how we publicly use it in the phrase of zhao gongzuo. For him, gongzuo should be

work that people voluntarily do, which is not restricted to waged labour; while gongzuo in zhao gongzuo tends to be merely a means to survive, which most people do not enjoy or voluntarily engage with.

Being directionless and uncertain of the future, as the key impulse of zhao gongzuo, is also acknowledged by a few other interlocutors. Yuzu is a second-year undergraduate in the UK, and she is planning on zhao gongzuo in the financial sector after graduation, despite the fact that she has perceived gongzuo to be 'meaningless for one's life' since a very young age. She emphasised that she would not equate her zhao gongzuo with the zhao gongzuo that seems to have a shared understanding for most people. For Yuzu, the latter is a 'passive' action, while her zhao gongzuo is not. Yuzu explained that she "has decided to zhao gongzuo in the financial sector with a lot of stress but high pay", which is a means she actively chose to achieve her goal of economic independence. Thus, her decision to zhao gongzuo in the financial sector is not zhao gongzuo as we ordinarily understand it, but is a clear "plan for her future". By highlighting the different levels of agency in the two senses of zhao gongzuo, we might understand why Lindsey, although conceptualising gongzuo as meaningless, does not seem to be perplexed by pursuing it, for Lindsey is actively zhao gongzuo with a clear plan for her future.

The judgement of passivity about zhao gongzuo reveals how we understand both gongzuo and meaningful life. For Yuzu and Long, 'knowing what to do with your life' ' differentiates positive gongzuo from zhao gongzuo, highlighting purpose as crucial for a meaningful life. It also explains why most of us feel resistant to zhao gongzuo, as Fan mentioned:

"Most Chinese undergraduates don't want to zhao gongzuo, because they don't know what they want yet."

It also suggests why we view gongzuo in zhao gongzuo negatively if it is just for material livelihood, but not something you genuinely enjoy. This speaks to Graeber's argument when explaining workers' unhappiness with doing jobs they find to be of no value to their lives at all, where he defines humans as comprising purposes, without which we would fall into existential crisis (2019: 242).

Yet, 'knowing what to do with your life' or 'having a plan for the future' itself is ambiguous. The 'what-to-do' and 'plan' can refer to an ultimate purpose in life, or merely something that can prevent you from having nothing to do. But finding the meaningful something is difficult, especially for ones in their early twenties, like us Chinese undergraduates. "It's impossible to figure out our ultimate goal at this age," acknowledged almost all interlocutors, including me.

Combining this with the passivity of zhao gongzuo judged by me and my interlocutors, gongzuo in the public understanding of zhao gongzuo can be seen to fall into the second meaning of 'what-to-do'. Aware of the difficulty in defining a truly meaningful something in life, and because of the ambiguous nature of something-to-do-with-one's-life, Gongzuo becomes a cheap alternative, or a placeholder: it provides certainty by offering something to do, however meaningless, rather than the anxiety of nothingness. Here, the certainty provided by gongzuo goes beyond the material economic certainty, but also encompasses an existential certainty that one values in life - despite it being a superficial one. The need to zhao gongzuo, as to find something to do in one's life, is helpfully noted by Fan: "Most

Chinese parents who want their children to zhao gongzuo are not really expecting them to gongzuo, they just cannot bear seeing the children have nothing to do."

The pressure of zhao gongzuo is much easier to confront compared to the uncertainty of what truly matters in one's life, since the former is apparently a much shorter-term problem than the latter. Not to mention that with a gongzuo, a stable income is guaranteed; as Lindsey mentioned, gongzuo provides wending-ness, a certainty in one's life. The certainty renders gongzuo so tempting compared to the attempt to figure out one's life goal, where the latter appears to be much more uncertain, and if unlucky, even fruitless. In this case, the pressure of zhao gongzuo stems from the worry of a possible failure in knowing the meaningful something in one's life. But the problem of figuring out the something is and will always be present at every moment of life. Thus, gongzuo in zhao gongzuo, is judged to be passive and negative, for it is not motivated by a vision for the future, but rather an escape from a present and persistent ultimate question of life. In this understanding, gongzuo, by providing a superficial something to keep someone busy, allows one to suspend reflection and the search for what truly matters in life. This understanding of gongzuo resonates with the concept of suspension suggested by Biao Xiang to describe a common condition of being in China, which is a status of keeping moving without critically reflecting on the most immediate present (Xiang, 2021).

Having discussed a specific feature of gongzuo, as well as the passivity attributed to gongzuo in the context of zhao gongzuo as used in everyday language, I identify three overlooked ambiguities to explain the tension between necessity and resistance to zhao gongzuo experienced by Chinese undergraduates. The first is the ambiguity of wending. Wending-ness of gongzuo, understood as the certainty it provides, makes gongzuo something desirable and necessary to pursue for a secure life. However, if wending is understood as the rigid restriction gongzuo imposes, gongzuo turns into something to be avoided. Second, the phrase zhao gongzuo itself has dual interpretations. If driven by directionlessness for the future, zhao gongzuo becomes a passive drift; but it can also be an active search, where people can zhao gongzuo as a means to actively achieve their other life goals, like Yuzu and Lindsey. The third ambiguity lies in the commonly used phrase 'knowing what to do with your life', or rather, in the ambiguity of 'what to do'. In the uncertainty of 'not knowing what to do with one's life' as a widely experienced condition of Chinese undergraduates, gongzuo, with the certainty it offers, provides a 'to-do' in life, making itself a ready-made answer to ease the anxiety of nothing-to-do. Yet this 'to-do' provided by gongzuo is simultaneously unsatisfying for its hollowness of 'meaning', making gongzuo both refuge and trap - a non-solution solution which cannot resolve our existential anxiety in the search for a meaningful life.

CONCLUSION

My discussion of gongzuo stems from the shared feeling of zhao gongzuo as a necessity, which unsettles us Chinese undergraduates, but we don't understand such unease. To make sense of our discomfort and even problematise such necessity, we need to understand gongzuo and zhao gongzuo, not only academically and abstractly, but also personally and practically - if this distinction should remain meaningful. The anthropological approach to work has focused

much on a structural and systematic analysis, as Folz and Smith (2024) detail, aiming to capture how broader historical, political, and ideological situations come to shape our understanding of work, and how individual unease can be linked to broader inequality or power dynamics on a systematic level. These formal, academic theories allow us to situate our struggle with work in a structural manner, preventing an understanding of work as merely a 'personal issue' that relies on personal responsibility. But to cope with reality, particularly for individual actors, what we need is not only an 'understanding' of work in abstract concepts, such as colonialism, capitalism and consumerism. These etic perspectives seem to "explain away rather than within problems" (Xiang, 2021) - evident from my reflections on the ethnography, where I found those theories insightful to see the 'structural issue', but never applicable to us Chinese undergraduates, as real agents with our personal struggle with gongzuo, to resolve the discomfort we face in the most immediate present. Through my ethnography, I've discovered why these theories can't be easily applied. The etic perspective on work fails to capture our struggle with gongzuo, not because of the etic-emic divide but because of limitations inherent to structural analysis. To render the critiques coherent and neat, it seems that the nuanced ambiguities in messy reality must be displaced with a supposedly unifying concept, like "waged labour". But as my emic, micro-level ethnography has shown, we, as Chinese undergraduates, experience the concept of gongzuo not as a coherent social fact, but as an unstable and ambiguous term in different contexts, which are often overlooked. By analysing and exposing these overlooked lexical ambiguities, I believe my emic perspective on gongzuo offers not only conceptual nuance that is lacking in an etic perspective in most anthropological studies of work, but also offers practical insights for the actors themselves to understand the unease by the necessity and resistance to gongzuo - or ourselves, as I am one of them as well.

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