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This Doesn't Count as Overtime

Yi Sun

Youth Empowerment International Association (YEIA), China

Abstract

This paper explores how excessive working hours are interpreted differently in daily life scenarios and institutional frameworks. The study selected workers from various industries in Shanghai as the research subjects and conducted eight semi-structured interviews. The interviewees rarely used the term "overtime" to describe their working conditions. Managers tend to express it in terms of dedication and job responsibilities. Project workers focus more on task completion. Domestic workers openly admit that their lives are constantly in a state of ceaseless movement. This article does not simply view "overwork culture" as an abstract cultural tradition or a unilateral mandatory requirement imposed by enterprises. Instead, it interprets it as a dynamic process where time is endowed with moral significance and responsibility is continuously passed down. Further analysis reveals that care responsibilities, governance pressures, organizational risks, and social protection gaps continuously shift to the grassroots level and individuals. The ultimate result is that workers sacrifice their personal time. The attitudes of workers towards overtime work are completely different. Overall, these patterns reveal important differences across occupational contexts. The key difference lies not solely in the length of hours, but in who has the power to withdraw, to refuse, and to truly clock off.

Keywords: ethnography of labor; overtime culture; responsibility offloading; social reproduction; time sovereignty