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## FROM NEIJUAN TO BUJUAN: CHINESE IT PROFESSIONALS' CHANGING PHILOSOPHY TOWARDS WORKING

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### Introduction

Having the highest average salary in China, IT professionals have enjoyed rapid development and upgrades in their industry. They are called *hu lian wang ren* (literally meaning: internet/IT personnel) in Mandarin Chinese. This group includes individuals engaged in high-tech tasks such as web design, software/hardware development, and data analysis, as well as tech tasks such as digital marketing, e-commerce, social media management, online content creation, and other comparable roles (Sha, 2022, p.7). However, despite their high average wages, they work with a sense of substitutability, as their positions are highly replaceable due to the intense job market competition and the devaluation of higher education in China. This issue is even more severe with the ongoing economic downturn affected by COVID-19 in 2019 (Chinese Higher Education Communication and Public Opinion Monitoring Online, 2022).

According to China Daily (2022), IT professionals are facing significant career uncertainties that extend to their personal lives as they strive to gain a competitive edge in the industry. Many of them turned to *neijuan* when they entered the industry, at the beginning aiming to pass the probational period, then aiming to pursue higher positions or salaries. Unlike its interpretation in the agricultural field as involution, *neijuan* is defined in the working context as internal energy-consuming competition (Yang, 2022). Yin et al. (2023) argue that *neijuan* reflects the work behavior of China's young adults, arising from the tremendous pressures faced by their generation, including housing, healthcare, education, and more (Yin et al., 2023). Among posts on social media platforms and media reports in China, *neijuan* is frequently discussed within the IT industry. Given the high uncertainty within the industry itself, the outcome of *neijuan* among IT professionals is not necessarily success in competition; it can lead to a sense of anxiety for others and calls for more internal competition (Mulvey & Wright, 2022). However, some IT employees still practice *neijuan* in their work. Although the duration and sources of its occurrence vary, they seek to achieve better results, such as job promotion or wage increases, through

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hard work and by making their hard work visible. Nevertheless, at some point, some IT professionals give up on it. In Chinese, this state is referred to as *bujian*.

The existing research on *neijuan* primarily discusses it as a social phenomenon, and currently, there are no academic sources focusing on IT professionals' (or other Chinese employees') choice of *bujian*. Moreover, scholars such as Zhao and Beveridge (2022) argue that one manifestation of *neijuan* in the workplace is overworking to gain advantages in terms of social differentiation, including consumption, professional ethics, interpersonal relationships, job security, and status advancement. However, this is not exactly true for IT professionals, as the high competition between IT companies and their heavy daily workloads make overworking a normal occurrence and organizational culture for them, not a standard for practicing *neijuan*. Therefore, this research argues that it would be helpful to conduct empirical studies by examining current and former *neijuan* practitioners, the IT professionals with at least one year of working experience in the same city, to understand their perception of *neijuan*. It is further argued that *neijuan* represents a culture and spiritual state, or a philosophy, for Chinese employees to survive in this specific industry.

### **Method: Semi-structured Interview and Qualitative Analysis**

The fieldwork for this research took place in Beijing, China, where the IT industry is highly concentrated. Moreover, living, residing, and working as a game designer in Beijing has made me very familiar with this city and the *neijuan* nature of the IT industry. Due to censorship on Chinese social media platforms, individuals' voices of dissatisfaction and complaints are often difficult to echo, as the content is likely to be perceived by social media as having a distorted mindset and spreading negative energy (Wang & Sun, 2015). To understand IT professionals' perceptions of *neijuan*, what drives them to embrace it, and the factors that lead them to choose *bujian*, I conducted an empirical study through 30 semi-structured interviews with IT professionals in Beijing from late 2023 to early 2024. This research embedded a fully qualitative approach through coding and analyzing the interview transcripts to examine their transition from *neijuan* to *bujian*, both as working philosophies within their IT contexts.

### **Key Findings**

This research finds that participants came to perceive *neijuan* as an active choice if they believed it could help them gain promotions or higher wages. Otherwise, passive *neijuan* occurred as they had to secure a job or cope with significant living pressures in Beijing as migrant residents. Moreover, what drives them to abandon *neijuan* is their understanding, derived from practicing and observing *neijuan* in their work, that its adjustment depends on whether the results are promising or meaningless.

This research also finds that whether *neijuan* is seen as meaningless or promising is largely determined by participants' salary ranges and economic situations, which subsequently affect their decision to embrace *bujian*. For example, participants perceiving meaningless results from *neijuan* tended to choose *bujian*. This further demonstrates that both *neijuan* and *bujian* are reactions to the commercialization of

labor, serving as ways to protect themselves and seek a more comfortable life within their limitations of work ability and living affordability.

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