

Why more young Chinese want to be civil servants

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WHEN ZHU LING graduated last year from a highly competitive master’s programme at one of China’s best universities, prestigious, well-paid jobs were hers for the taking. Instead she chose to become a civil servant for the central government, earning 6,000 yuan (\$930) a month, or less than some Beijing professionals spend on gym membership.

A decade ago, Miss Zhu (not her real name) might have joined a multinational firm. They pay well, and it was “cool to work for foreign companies, because that shows your international horizons, and you can travel all over the world”, she says over cappuccino at an outdoor cafe in Beijing. Five years ago, top graduates vied to join home-grown technology giants like Alibaba, Tencent or Huawei. In addition to high salaries, such firms had free-thinking cultures and seemed to respect young people, she explains.

Today, the trends are changing again. China still wants foreign businesses for their know-how and dynamism, but their status “is definitely going down”, says Miss Zhu. Geopolitical distrust is bleeding into work relations. Chinese employed by foreigners have noticed that they never advance beyond middle management and are the first to be laid off in bad times, she claims. As for domestic technology firms, their high salaries continue to attract the young. But they also face vocal criticism in Chinese media for domineering business practices and the “996” work schedules of their staff, toiling from at least 9am to 9pm, six days a week. In all, a third of Miss

Zhu's classmates took civil-service examinations. Some were hired by state-owned banks. Three joined technology companies. None joined a foreign firm.

Chinese refer to securing an official position as *shang an*, or “landing ashore”, reflecting the security such jobs offer. In 2020, 1.6m people passed background checks to take national civil-service exams, 140,000 more than the year before. Almost a million candidates eventually sat the exam, chasing 25,700 jobs. Still more took tests to become provincial and local officials. Many were fleeing a bleak market for new graduates, as covid-19 hit private firms.

Miss Zhu says she joined an elite government ministry in search of meaningful work. She will soon spend two years as an official in a remote rural area, saying: “If you want to become a good policymaker, you have to go to the grassroots level.” A decade ago her parents would not have wanted her to join the public sector, she thinks. They distrusted officials, who routinely shook them down for bribes. Back then they would also have worried about her prospects as someone with no family *guanxi*, or connections: her grandfather was a farmer and her parents run a small business. She credits an anti-corruption drive that began in 2012 with changing their views of officialdom.

Miss Zhu's blend of ambition and idealism is a good fit with the times. *Qiushi*, a theoretical journal, recently published a speech that President Xi Jinping made in January to national and provincial leaders. He described “chaos” in the outside world, celebrated China's new strength and declared that “time and momentum are on our side”. Mr Xi also identified risks for China, ranging from dependence on foreign technologies to political turmoil should “an insurmountable gap between the rich and the poor” appear. He told officials to study the Soviet Union's collapse, after its ruling Communist Party became “a privileged bureaucracy that defended only its own interests”.

Aware of public anger about inequality, Chinese propaganda has taken a populist turn, presenting the party as an ally against rapacious capitalism. In April authorities launched an anti-trust probe into Meituan, a food-delivery giant. Two days later Beijing Television showed a city official spending a day undercover, riding an electric scooter for Meituan. The exhausted bureaucrat told viewers that the work is “too difficult”, earning praise for his caring ways from the *People's Daily*, a flagship party newspaper. Official media did not mention Chen Guojiang, a real-life Beijing delivery rider detained after posting videos of grim working conditions. He was charged on April 2nd with “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”, a catch-all crime used against activists who challenge the party's monopoly over questions of social justice.

Miss Zhu admits that idealism is not the only reason to join the public sector. A brilliant classmate might have become a university lecturer, but instead took a post at a highly selective high school. She became a teacher because, years from now, she will be entitled to a school place for her (as yet unborn) child. To millions of hard-pressed parents who see education as their children's only hope of getting ahead, such planning makes perfect sense.

If you can't beat 'em...

Other civil servants accept a low salary because of the heavily subsidised housing, health insurance and pension that go with it. Some small-town or provincial Chinese take on boring government jobs that come with hard-to-secure residence papers for such megacities as Beijing or Shanghai. A sense of filial duty prompted Wu Hong, an only child who graduated in 2008, to leave his software business in the boomtown of Shenzhen and return to his home province of Jiangxi. Mr Wu (not his real name) is now a poorly paid local bureaucrat. “My parents are getting old, and in my small town there is no better place to find a stable job,” he says.

OffCN, an adult-education business, prepares millions of students each year for public-sector exams. It grew fast during the pandemic. “Training centres rose like bamboo shoots after rain,” says an OffCN manager in Beijing. He once looked down on civil-service jobs. Now he regrets missing the age limit—typically 35—for joining many government departments.

Ordinary Chinese are often cynical about officials as a class, deeming them slow to help and quick to conceal mistakes. But for many in the private economy, just keeping heads above water is an exhausting slog. Small wonder some dream of heading ashore. ■

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