

The Emergence and Resolution Strategies for Delayed Employment in the VUCA Era: A Qualitative Investigation Based on Chinese College Graduates

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ABSTRACT

In the VUCA era, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, delayed employment among Chinese university graduates has emerged as a collective employment predicament, yet existing research tends to treat this phenomenon as homogeneous, overlooking its internal diversity and generative mechanisms. This qualitative study investigates the generative mechanisms of delayed employment through semi-structured interviews with 16 graduates. The findings reveal two distinct types: constrained involuntary delayed employment, driven by economic weakness, education–market decoupling, and unfulfilled plans; and voluntary deliberate delayed employment, shaped by policy buffers, perceived overqualification, career confusion, and family support. The study also identifies how institutional policies (e.g., fresh graduate status) paradoxically incentivize prolonged non-employment. Extending psychological and emotional compensation theories to the labor market domain, the findings call for stratified interventions: structural empowerment for the involuntarily delayed and guided, time-bound support for the voluntarily delayed. This research offers actionable insights for policymakers, universities, families, and career counselors.

Keywords: Delayed employment; VUCA era; Chinese university graduates; Employment support

INTRODUCTION

The modern world has reached the VUCA period, which is defined by the simultaneous presence of complexity, ambiguity, volatility, and uncertainty. Against this backdrop, Chinese university graduates face a particularly challenging employment landscape, influenced by multiple converging factors including population aging, a decelerating national economy, an increasingly competitive social milieu marked by “involution”, persistent repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as heightened individual anxieties regarding uncertainty and a strong inclination toward stability. This structural pressure has driven a significant transformation in group employment behavior.

In response to these multifaceted pressures, encompassing both labor market challenges and psychological stressors or as a consequence of insufficient career preparedness, a subset of graduates has adopted a strategy commonly referred to as “delayed employment”. This approach represents a risk-averse social adaptation

whereby individuals delay immediate full-time workforce entry post-graduation in favor of alternative engagements such as residing with family, pursuing advanced education, preparing for examinations, studying abroad, initiating entrepreneurial ventures, or allocating time for personal recovery. Such a deliberate deceleration in workforce integration facilitates a more reflective and strategic evaluation of long-term career trajectories and personal development before committing to definitive life course decisions. According to relevant Chinese data, as of mid-April 2024, the proportion of delayed employment among the 2024 cohort of college graduates has risen to 19.1%, representing an increase of 3.2 percentage points compared to 15.9% in 2022 (Dazhong Net, 2024). These figures indicate that delayed employment is no longer a niche choice, but is increasingly becoming a significant manifestation of collective employment challenges in the VUCA era.

Despite the Chinese government having placed greater emphasis in recent years on promoting youth employment, particularly for university graduates, with a focus on expanding employment and career development pathways for young people including graduates and actively implementing employment support initiatives, achieving full employment remains fraught with challenges in the face of persistently rising graduate numbers. It is projected that by 2026, the total number of graduates from regular higher education institutions nationwide will reach 12.7 million, reflecting an increase of 480,000 over the previous year (China Youth Daily, 2025). Within the context of a structural imbalance between labor market supply and demand, the proportion of graduates opting for deferred employment is anticipated to rise further. From a practical perspective, the deceleration in employment among a large number of university graduates not only adversely affects their individual livelihood and development but also leads to a certain degree of talent resource inefficiency. Moreover, it poses challenges to the achievement of universities' goals for high-quality and full employment, as well as to the stable and sustainable development of society.

Although previous studies have extensively examined the factors influencing “delayed employment”, certain limitations remain. Firstly, existing research often fails to adequately acknowledge the diversity and individual differences among university graduates exhibiting delayed employment behaviors. In particular, there is a lack of micro-level classification within this group, as well as insufficient systematic analysis regarding whether such employment delays represent active choices or passive outcomes. Furthermore, scholarly understanding of how to effectively facilitate the integration of these individuals into the labor market remains underdeveloped. Secondly, current literature lacks sufficient insight into the employment-related psychological states of university graduates amid the rapid social transformations characterizing the so-called “VUCA Era”. For instance, phenomena such as employment anxiety driven by hyper-competition and the emergence of a “lying flat” mentality reflect complex socio-psychological dynamics that are not yet fully understood. As a result, the generative mechanisms underlying the formation of the delayed employment cohort remain inadequately explained, warranting further in-depth investigation. Based on this foundation, the present study seeks to elucidate the structural and subjective mechanisms that give rise to the phenomenon of “delayed employment” among recent university graduates in China, and to propose a coherent framework for proactive employment support. By doing so, this research aims not only to contribute to alleviating the systemic constraints faced by these graduates, but also to inform policy design and institutional responses with empirically grounded insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Delayed Employment in the Chinese Context

The concept of “delayed employment” was first introduced in academic discourse in the United Kingdom, where it was empirically observed and conceptualized through phenomena such as the “gap year” and the “NEET” population. The former conceptualizes a transitional period in which graduates deliberately defer formal entry

into the labor market. This intentional gap is characterized by activities such as extended travel, volunteer work, or immersive civic engagement, undertaken as a means of reflexive life exploration and identity formation prior to committing to long-term career paths (Rabie & Naidoo, 2016). “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) refers to young people who are not engaged in further education, lack stable employment, have not undergone vocational skills training, and are financially dependent on their families (Li, 2015). Extant research by Crites and his colleagues suggests that, during the exploratory phase of career construction, individuals with higher levels of career maturity are more capable of crystallizing their vocational identities and exhibit greater decisional readiness with respect to well-informed occupational choices (Crites, 1976). By contrast, the subgroup referred to herein as “NEET” displays a pronounced tendency toward risk aversion, a stronger reliance on familial support in navigating career decisions, and the articulation of occupational aspirations that remain largely idealistic rather than pragmatically oriented (Furlong, 2006). It is important to note that the phenomenon of delayed employment among university graduates in China exhibits distinct characteristics when compared to similar trends in other national contexts. Beyond the commonly recognized forms of deferral, the postponement period among Chinese graduates is predominantly oriented toward intensive preparation for highly competitive public-sector careers—such as civil service and teaching positions—or for admission to graduate-level academic programs, including master’s and doctoral degrees. This phenomenon is grounded in the cultural logic of meritocracy and must be understood in relation to two intersecting macro-structural conditions: the massification of China’s higher education system, driven by decades of systematic enrollment expansion, and the persistent disequilibrium between the supply of university graduates and the absorptive capacity of the labor market.

Group characteristics of delayed employment of Chinese college graduates

In examining the characteristics of the “delayed employment” population, the extant literature has predominantly coalesced around three interconnected thematic domains: basic sociodemographic profiles, disciplinary backgrounds, and occupational values or aspirations. These dimensions have been the subject of extensive scholarly attention and remain vigorously debated within the field.

In terms of sociodemographic determinants, empirical findings reveal significant intra-group variation in the propensity for delayed employment. Male graduates exhibit a markedly higher tendency toward postponing labor market entry than their female counterparts, who tend to demonstrate more proactive job-seeking behaviors. Regarding geographic origins, graduates from urban backgrounds are significantly overrepresented among those opting for employment delay, whereas their rural-origin peers are more inclined to adjust their expectations downward and persist in job searching. Furthermore, the likelihood of delayed employment positively correlates with family income: graduates from higher-income households are more predisposed to postpone workforce entry, reflecting the enabling role of greater economic resources and a more expansive capacity to absorb potential trial-and-error costs in early career decisions. At the institutional level, analyses of disciplinary distribution and career preparation reveal a differentiated pattern in the prevalence of delayed employment across university tiers. Among graduates from institutions of higher academic standing—particularly “Double First-Class” universities—the proportion opting for employment delay is comparatively elevated, likely reflecting the compounded weight of heightened societal expectations and internalized aspirational pressures. In contrast, students from lower-tier institutions exhibit lower rates of postponement, potentially due to more constrained employment prospects and reduced latitude for career exploration. Disciplinary background further moderates these trends. Graduates specializing in the humanities and social sciences tend to hold more traditional occupational orientations, often exhibiting a pronounced preference for stable, institutionally sheltered employment. This disposition may render their school-to-work transitions more protracted and uncertain. By contrast, students in science and engineering fields benefit from a more robust external labor market, with a greater abundance of job opportunities facilitating smoother post-graduation transitions and correspondingly lower rates of delayed employment. Additionally, career planning clarity emerges as a significant mitigating

factor: students who demonstrate more defined career intentions at graduation are substantially less likely to experience prolonged employment delay, underscoring the protective function of anticipatory vocational socialization. Concurrently, an examination of occupational preferences within the university-based "delayed employment" population reveals a sustained orientation and commitment toward positions in the civil service and public institutions. This entrenched aspiration for institutionally embedded employment constitutes a primary factor explaining their prolonged detachment from, or non-participation in, the broader labor market (Huang & Tang, 2024). This observation aligns closely with the theoretical framework of labor market segmentation.

In scholarly discourse, delayed employment is increasingly understood as the product of an interaction between subjective agency and structural constraints. While a minority perspective, exemplified by Nieman, regards this phenomenon optimistically—as a temporary moratorium that allows graduates to pause and navigate the uncertainties of future life trajectories—the prevailing scholarly consensus adopts a more cautious stance (Nieman, 2013). Most researchers contend that the proliferation of delayed employment carries significant implications at multiple levels. At the individual level, it is associated with delayed career development, postponed transitions to economic independence, and heightened psychological distress. These effects may, in turn, erode self-confidence and diminish long-term career competitiveness. At the macro-social level, the widespread persistence of this phenomenon risks generating inefficiencies in educational investment, exacerbating structural mismatches between talent supply and labor market demand (Pan et al., 2024), and potentially undermining both socioeconomic development and social stability. At the familial level, delayed employment imposes sustained economic burdens on households and prolongs the dependency of adult children, which in severe cases may precipitate intra-household tensions and intergenerational conflict (Peng & Fu, 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature examining the phenomenon of "delayed employment" among college graduates, existing studies tend to treat this group as relatively homogeneous, overlooking the internal diversity and individual variations that characterize delayed labor market entry. Consequently, there remains a lack of micro-level classification that captures the nuanced distinctions within the "delayed employment" population. Furthermore, limited attention has been paid to the subjective employment orientations of graduates in the context of what might be termed the "UVCA Era"—marked by intensified internal competition, rising anxiety over career prospects, and the emergence of coping strategies such as "lying flat" among those disengaged from the rat race. Prevailing societal narratives often frame delayed employment in negative terms, yet such perspectives obscure the complex psychological and structural factors shaping graduates' transitions. As a result, existing frameworks fall short of fully elucidating the mechanisms that generate "delayed employment," particularly with respect to whether individuals' delayed entry reflects active choice or constrained passivity. The question of how this group may eventually integrate into the labor market remains undertheorized. In response to these gaps, the present study seeks to build upon prior scholarship by offering a more nuanced, micro-level investigation into the heterogeneity, motivations, and structural conditions underlying "delayed employment" among contemporary university graduates.

Research Method and Design

The selection of research methods is fundamentally determined by factors such as the research question, research objectives, temporal and spatial context, and the characteristics of the research subjects (Chen, 2000). This study focuses on the practical issues surrounding the phenomenon of delayed employment among Chinese university graduates in the context of a VUCA society. It aims to explore why graduates choose delayed employment, the differences in the underlying group mentality, and how to facilitate their integration into the labor market. These core questions necessitate a research approach that is largely exploratory and interpretive in nature. Guided by the research objectives and questions, this paper seeks to uncover the generative mechanisms behind the choice

of delayed employment in the VUCA era and to construct systematic employment promotion strategies aimed at helping university graduates overcome collective challenges. Based on the overall research framework and the principle of aligning research methods with research questions, this study adopts a qualitative research approach over a quantitative one.

Semi-structured Interview

Grounded in a qualitative research approach, this study employs semi-structured interviews, a commonly used method of qualitative data collection, with the overarching aim of understanding the causes behind the emergence of the delayed employment group among college graduates, as well as their genuine inner aspirations. These narrative-style accounts represent the complex expression and authentic outpouring of the interviewees' personal experiences. The open-ended, loosely structured nature of the interview questions allows for a high degree of exploration, which to some extent alleviates any rigidity or tension on the part of the respondents. This enables them to speak freely in a relatively relaxed communicative context, facilitating the extraction of deeper layers of information and resulting in richer qualitative data. Such an approach is essential for gaining insight into the mechanisms underlying the formation of the delayed employment mindset among Chinese college graduates in the context of the VUCA era.

Participant Selection and Interview Data Collection

Grounded in a qualitative research orientation, this study adopts a sampling strategy that integrates convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling to ensure that the collected data can adequately address the research questions. In qualitative research, the selection of cases and participants is primarily guided by their capacity to provide information relevant to the research questions. To further elucidate the research questions, this study establishes sampling criteria based on the research objectives, the educational levels of college graduates, and the Chinese government's definition of "fresh graduate" status. The specific sampling criteria are as follows: (1) The study covers graduates from all provinces and municipalities across China (excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan), with no restrictions on household registration (*hukou*). (2) Participants are limited to fresh graduates and those who have graduated within the past two years, which is the period officially designated as the "job-seeking window," spanning associate degree, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. Particular attention is given to their employment status, career development trajectories, and key transitional experiences from graduation to the present. (3) In terms of demographic characteristics, no uniform restrictions are imposed regarding gender or place of origin; however, efforts are made to maintain basic diversity across these characteristics throughout the sampling process to avoid information bias resulting from overrepresentation of any single group. (4) Regarding institutional type, the sample includes graduates from "Double First-Class" universities, general undergraduate institutions, junior colleges, and overseas universities, as well as from both public and private institutions, so as to capture group heterogeneity across different educational resource contexts.

The survey received ethics approval from the Ethics Committee at Nanfang College Guangzhou. In terms of specific recruitment strategies, the study first made initial contact through the researcher's personal networks and online platforms (such as social media like Xiaohongshu, WeChat, Douyin, and graduate communities), employing convenience sampling to obtain the first batch of participants. Subsequently, in accordance with the research progress and practical needs, snowball sampling was conducted through the social networks of the participants, gradually extending to specific groups that were difficult to reach through public channels. Throughout the sampling process, purposive sampling was used to strategically supplement key informants by continuously cross-referencing the research questions with the characteristics of the existing sample. Data were collected from September 2025 to December 2025. The duration of communication between the researcher and each participant ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. The data collection process was conducted with the consent of

the interviewees. Following the principle of simultaneous data organization and analysis, the study employed content analysis to extract and summarize the core themes or concepts from the interview transcripts. For certain participants, follow-up questions were posed to allow for further exploration and clarification of ambiguities or puzzles that emerged during the analysis of the initial data. Ultimately, 16 graduates in a state of delayed employment were recruited to participate in the interviews. They provided qualitative data that were authentic and contextually rich, and the sample reached theoretical saturation. Detailed information about the participants is presented in Table 1. To protect the participants' identities from disclosure, all identifiable information such as place names and personal names in this study has been anonymized or represented in coded form.

Table 1. Description of research participants

Case Number	Gender	Age	Region	Household Registration	Education	University Type	The Causes of Delayed Employment
Case 01	Female	26	Henan	Urban	Master	Double First-Class Public	Education promotion plan failed, delay timely employment
Case 02	Male	22	Tianjing	Rual	Bachelor	General Public	Due to the constraints of the vision for further education, current reluctance to enter the workforce
Case 03	Female	24	Guangdong	Urban	Master	Overseas Public	Desire for rest and recreation, embracing the present, and delaying labor market entry
Case 04	Female	31	Jilin	Urban	Doctor	Double First-Class Public	Pursuing a stable teaching position, yet unable to secure one
Case 05	Male	30	Beijing	Urban	Master	Double First-Class Public	Unsuccessful in civil service and public institution examinations, delaying timely employment
Case 06	Female	23	Liaoning	Urban	Bachelor	General Public	Constrained by plans for civil service and public institution examinations, temporarily not considering employment
Case 07	Female	28	Henan	Urban	Master	General Public	Fully devoted to preparing for doctoral program application examinations, temporarily not considering employment
Case 08	Female	25	Gansu	Urban	Master	General Public	Constrained by plans for civil service and public institution examinations, temporarily not considering employment
Case 09	Male	24	Jiangxi	Urban	Bachelor	General Public	Outdated knowledge in the major, misalignment between education and market demand
Case 10	Male	23	Hainan	Urban	Bachelor	General Public	Confused about career planning, direction not yet determined

Case 11	Female	26	Sanxi	Rual	Master	General Public	Failed to advance their education, discouraged and wanting to rest
Case 12	Male	22	Jiangxi	Rual	Bachelor	General Private	Constrained by market conditions, few positions related to the major
Case 13	Female	23	Guangdong	Urban	Junior college	Higher vocational Public	Constrained by market conditions, few positions related to the major
Case 14	Male	34	Liaoning	Urban	Doctor	Double First-Class Public	Pursuing a stable teaching position, yet unable to secure one
Case 15	Male	23	Sichuan	Rual	Bachelor	General Private	Due to the constraints of the vision for further education, current reluctance to enter the workforce
Case 16	Male	20	Guangdong	Rual	Junior college	Higher vocational Public	Educational qualifications fail to meet job requirements, difficulty finding employment

Interview Data Analysis

Data organization and analysis, according to the purpose of the research, involve systematizing and rationalizing the collected raw data, and then presenting the data through a process of gradual focusing and condensation, with the ultimate goal of interpreting the meaning of the data. In this study, content analysis was employed. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the principle of conducting organization and analysis simultaneously was adhered to, proceeding from the data and grounding all findings in the qualitative data. Based on the principle of triangulation, multi-dimensional data examination was ensured. The validity of data analysis was enhanced through repeated verification and member checking (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Ethical principles for the protection of research participants, as required in social science research, were implemented in practice. Throughout the research process, the author regularly engaged in discussions with the supervisor and doctoral students specializing in youth social security research, thereby minimizing personal bias. In terms of data analysis, this study followed the steps of "open coding–axial coding– selective coding" to progressively refine and summarize the interview texts. The basic procedure was as follows: First, the entire interview data were read thoroughly to form a general impression. In the open coding phase, initial concepts related to employment delay were identified (e.g., "examination preparation cycle" "family economic cushioning" "major-job mismatch" "perceived overqualification"). Second, in the axial coding phase, these concepts were grouped into several sub-themes. Finally, through selective coding, they were integrated under core themes to better present the factors contributing to the formation of the "delayed employment" group among college graduates in the BAN1 era. The specific coding results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary Table of Interview Data Themes

Core Theme	Sub-Theme	Quotes (Part excerpt)
Constrained Involuntary Delayed Employment	Macroeconomic weakness and insufficient labor market absorption	Case15: "The employment environment is tough due to the sluggish economy, with few job openings. The only option is to pursue higher degrees for more choices."
		Case14: "An oversupply of PhDs has made academic job competition fierce,

	capacity	causing months of anxiety in job hunting.”
	Education-Market decoupling and Major-Position mismatch	Case13: “Too few local positions matching my major, I have to stay at home.”
		Case12: “My major is a ‘dead-end’ one—no eligible posts for civil service exams, and few relevant jobs available.”
		Case09: “What I learned in investment studies is disconnected from job requirements; investment banking is almost impossible.”
	Unfulfilled personal plans and the “Exam Preparation Obsession” trap	Case01: “After failing to enter a PhD program, I missed the autumn and spring campus recruitment windows, and was forced to restart exam preparation and job hunting after graduation.”
		Case07: “I haven’t looked for a job for two years since my master’s degree, as I find most jobs unrewarding; I’ve been persistently preparing for doctoral entrance exams.
Voluntary Deliberate Delayed Employment	Fresh graduate status policy buffer and credentialism competition	Case02: “After failing the postgraduate entrance exam, I decided to retake it next year, delaying employment for a better chance.”
		Case06: “Fresh graduate status carries significant restrictive weight in civil service exams and interviews with large corporations.”
	Perceived Overqualification and the Pursuit of “Dignified and Stable” Employment	Case01: “My parents believe a master’s degree deserves more than just any job, so they support my continued preparation for civil service exams.”
		Case04: “After earning my PhD, I insist on a tenured academic position and refuse to compromise.”
		Case08: “Despite the pressure, I am unwilling to settle for a job that falls short of my expectations.”
	Career Confusion and the Need for Psychological Adjustment	Case10: “Feeling lost about my career path, I temporarily help with the family business and take things as they come.”
		Case11: “Discouraged by my failure in the doctoral entrance exam, I want to take a break before resuming exam preparation for a tenured position.”
		Case07: “I rely on my savings to sustain this transition period, and may seek financial support from my parents if necessary.”
	Hedonic Delay Enabled by Family Economic and Emotional Support	Case03: “Unwilling to enter the workforce, I procrastinate and indulge in the present. After six months of taking time off, I grew anxious as the autumn campus recruitment approached and began job hunting.”

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the generative mechanisms and differentiated pathways for resolving the phenomenon of "delayed employment" among university graduates in the VUCA era. Based on comprehensive analysis of interview data, two core types and seven sub-themes were identified. These findings elucidate the distinct generative logics underlying "delayed employment out of necessity" versus "delayed employment through proactive planning." Crucially, the analysis moves beyond descriptive accounts to critically assess whether delayed employment genuinely serves as a positive buffer for individual development or merely devolves into a

protracted predicament under societal risk-avoidance mechanisms. Furthermore, the findings are situated within a cross-level context that encompasses the macro-environment of the VUCA era, supply-side contradictions in higher education, and inter-generational shifts in family support.

Constrained Involuntary Delayed Employment Under the Dual Squeeze of Structural Constraints and Individual Planning Failures

Constrained involuntary delayed employment refers to a state in which college graduates are forced to postpone their entry into the labor market due to structural pressures such as macroeconomic weakness, education-market decoupling, and supply-demand imbalances, as well as the failure of individual plans (e.g., preparing for civil service or postgraduate entrance exams). Although this group possesses a willingness to work, they find themselves trapped in a predicament of "no jobs available" and "slow and difficult employment" under multiple constraints. Qualitative data analysis reveals three interrelated generative pathways.

Macroeconomic Weakness and Insufficient Labor Market Absorption Capacity

In the context of economic weakness, China faces considerable overall employment pressure. Although the number of college graduates has been increasing year by year, the labor market's absorption capacity remains limited. Data show that since 2022, the number of college graduates has exceeded ten million for three consecutive years, and the number of graduates in 2025 is expected to reach 12.22 million, an increase of 430,000 year-on-year, indicating unabated employment pressure (Economic Daily, 2022). Moreover, as a cascading effect of the economic downturn, issues such as weak market demand, high operating costs, and financing difficulties persistently trouble small and medium-sized enterprises leading them to adopt more conservative hiring strategies. Consequently, the role of SMEs as a "buffer" or "reservoir" for employment has diminished, making the structural contradictions in employment more pronounced. Furthermore, with the shift in generational work values, post-2000s employees who represent the fresh blood in the workforce—place greater emphasis on work-life balance and hold higher expectations regarding compensation, benefits, and corporate culture. However, the constrained economic environment limits the compensation packages and work flexibility that enterprises can offer, causing post-2000s graduates to oscillate between expectations and reality. This dynamic is also one of the factors contributing to the rising phenomenon of delayed employment among college graduates.

As Case 13 shared, "It's not that I don't want to work, there are few positions that match my major. The job I interviewed for offers a monthly take-home pay of less than 3,000 yuan, yet requires frequent overtime. I think I'll take my time and look for a job that balances financial viability with quality of life."

Education-Market Decoupling and Major-Position Mismatch

On the one hand, the rapid expansion of the digital economy and the low-altitude economy has led to a sharp rise in demand for highly skilled talent in these emerging sectors. However, a misalignment and temporal lag persist between the supply structure of existing academic disciplines and the demand structure of the labor market. Consequently, the specialized knowledge acquired by some students fails to meet the requirements of industrial upgrading or translate into effective market competitiveness, thereby excluding them from entry into the labor market (Lai, 2024). Case 09 stated, "What I learned in investment studies is disconnected from job requirements; investment banking is almost impossible." This suggests that low levels of specific and experience-based human capital weaken the adaptability of college graduates to the labor market, thereby affecting their employment progress. On the other hand, the supply of positions matching graduates' majors is smaller than the number of graduates in those fields, forcing many graduates into intense competition for limited positions and delaying their entry into the labor market. Case 12 stated, "My major is a 'dead-end' one—no eligible posts for civil service exams, and few relevant jobs available." The situation of Case 12 is by no means

isolated. This structural mismatch, characterized by an oversupply of graduates and an undersupply of suitable positions, traps graduates in a narrow alley: few jobs ahead while a surging crowd presses from behind. The job search stretches into months, marked by repeated setbacks and dead ends.

Unfulfilled Personal Plans and the “Exam Preparation Obsession” Trap

Beyond macro-structural constraints, planning failures at the individual level also contribute to constrained involuntary delayed employment. Many graduates invest all their efforts in preparing for civil service exams, graduate school entrance exams, or doctoral entrance exams. Once they fail, they miss critical recruitment windows such as autumn and spring campus hiring, and are forced into the more competitive open market for experienced job seekers (Luo et al., 2025). As Case 01 described, "After failing to enter a PhD program, I missed the autumn and spring campus recruitment windows, and was forced to restart exam preparation and job hunting after graduation." Case 07, in contrast, fell into a repetitive cycle of exam preparation. She noted, "I haven't looked for a job for two years since my master's degree, as I find most jobs unrewarding; I've been persistently preparing for doctoral entrance exams." This obsession with the "prepare-fail-reprepare" cycle essentially reflects an irrational commitment to sunk costs. In addition, respondents experienced social pressure from relatives' comments, which further intensified their anxiety. Notably, coping strategies after planning failures diverge: some individuals turn to the labor market, whereas others continue to fight repeatedly. The former, though still exhibiting delayed employment, have begun transitioning toward social integration; the latter may become entrenched in a long-term NEET (not in employment, education, or training) status, constituting a deeper risk.

In summary, constrained involuntary delayed employment results from the triple squeeze of economic weakness, education-market decoupling, and planning failure. Its essence is "difficulty in finding employment" rather than "unwillingness to work," and thus interventions should focus on improving the external environment to empower these graduates.

Voluntary Deliberate Delayed Employment Under the Joint Influence of Elevated Employment Aspirations and Support Systems

"Voluntary deliberate delayed employment" is the behavioral outcome of the joint influence of college graduates' elevated employment aspirations and their support systems. At the individual level, the upgrading of employment aspirations is concretely manifested in taking a gap year to prepare for civil service or graduate school entrance exams, a reluctance to settle for less due to perceived overqualification, a pursuit of psychological adjustment and self-exploration, and a present-oriented mindset of enjoying life. At the systemic level, the support system that indirectly enables "proactive delay" includes the buffer period provided by national policies, the demand for human capital under intensified credential inflation, the social normative constraints emphasizing "stable employment" and "quality employment," and the economic and emotional support from families. This group does not face a situation of "no jobs available"; rather, they experience "having jobs but not taking them" or "choosing selectively among jobs." Their behavior is distinctly strategic and agentic. Qualitative data analysis reveals four interrelated generative pathways.

Voluntary Deliberate Delayed Employment Co-Shaped by the Policy Buffer for Fresh Graduate Status and Involutional Human Capital Demand

China's policy on fresh graduate status was originally intended to protect graduates' job-seeking rights, yet in practice it has been transformed into a strategic resource for securing stability. In order to retain this status and thereby remain eligible for civil service exams and quality corporate campus recruitment, many graduates proactively choose not to pay social insurance or enter formal employment (Lu, 2019), instead using a gap year

to focus fully on exam preparation. At the same time, facing competitive pressures from "credential inflation," some graduates continuously enhance their human capital by repeatedly sitting for graduate or doctoral entrance exams. Case06 noted, "Fresh graduate status carries significant restrictive weight in civil service exams and interviews with large corporations." After failing the graduate entrance exam, Case02 decided, "Retake the exam for another year and delay employment." This distortion from "gap year" to "GPA year" reflects the interplay of institutional buffers and individual involuntional anxiety (Li, 2023). From the perspective of psychological compensation theory, when individuals perceive labor market uncertainty, they tend to restore psychological equilibrium by extending educational investment or preserving status advantages. However, this strategy may also solidify into an obsession with "reaching the shore".

Perceived Overqualification and the Ideal of "Decent and Stable" Employment as Drivers of Proactive Delayed Employment

Highly educated graduates commonly experience perceived overqualification, that is, the belief that their educational credentials and abilities exceed those required for available jobs in the market, making them reluctant to "settle for less." Relevant research indicates that approximately 80.1% of doctoral graduates and 59.9% of master's graduates from Chinese universities choose to work within the state sector (Yue et al., 2022). This suggests that, under the influence of traditional norms such as "a good scholar can become an official" and the "iron rice bowl," positions within the state apparatus have become the preferred or even the sole option for many graduates. However, competition for such positions is intensely fierce, forcing many graduates to extend their waiting period for employment.

As Participant 01 reflected, "My parents believe a master's degree deserves more than just any job, so they support my continued preparation for civil service exams." After obtaining their doctorates, Case 04 and Case 14 insisted on "faculty positions with tenure at universities and refused to compromise." Case 08 frankly stated, "I reject taking a job that does not satisfy me."

It is not uncommon for college graduates to deliberately postpone labor market entry in order to continue searching for positions that offer higher remuneration and more favorable benefit packages (Cieslik et al., 2021). This mentality of "the high platform from which one cannot descend" essentially represents a rigid adherence to the symbolic value of educational credentials (Yang & Wang, 2024). The expectation of "decent employment" constitutes a spiritual support system that reinforces the legitimacy of refusing "lower status jobs," yet at the same time, it transforms delayed employment from a short term strategy into a source of long term identity anxiety.

Career Confusion and the Need for Psychological Adjustment as Drivers of a "Life Exploration Employment Gap"

In contemporary society, young people are increasingly prone to a state of confusion regarding life choices and a sense of spiritual dislocation (Ao, 2013). Standing at the crossroads of life, some graduates feel uncertain and powerless about the careers they wish to pursue, and thus respond by adopting a strategy of observation, or "wait and see," and continued exploration.

Case 10 had mentioned, "To be honest, I would like to develop in the field I studied, but after transferring from a vocational college to a university through a top-up program, I only took classes for one and a half years. Frankly, I feel I still don't really understand it. My mother supports me, but my father thinks there are limitations and suggests I take a look around. Anyway, I am confused. For now, I just help my family take care of the store's

business, and rest when there's nothing to do. I'll take it step by step and see what happens next."

This proactive buffering strategy represents a pragmatic choice in the face of an uncertain future. It stems from a gradually awakening sense of individualization and has increasingly become a narrative discourse through which some young people explore more possibilities in life and reconstruct their selves.

Furthermore, due to the intense involitional pressure experienced during their schooling and setbacks in development, some college graduates actively hit the pause button. They slow down their pace to alleviate mental anxiety, reflect on and explore future directions, cast off repression and restlessness, break free from constraints, and achieve emotional release. Consequently, they temporarily put aside the consideration of employment.

"The main reason is that I failed the doctoral entrance exam. I had spent a lot of time and energy preparing for it, and I was quite discouraged. I want to rest for a while. After resting, I'll take the exams again and look for a job with a stable position." (Case 11)

Thus, in the VUCA era, an increasing number of individuals are disengaging from grand narratives, disregarding the role expectations imposed on them by mainstream society, and suspending the ticking of the social clock (Zheng & Li, 2022). They engage in psychological adjustment and recuperation, exploring different life course experiences while gradually clarifying their future development direction. However, whether this exploratory gap period can translate into effective accumulation of career capital depends on whether the individual has a clear plan for re entering the workforce. Without a well defined goal, they may drift from "exploration" toward "aimless floating".

Hedonistic Proactive Delayed Employment Enabled by Family Economic Cushioning and Emotional Support

Unlike the three preceding types, a small subset of graduates tends to deviate from mainstream societal expectations regarding the linear trajectory of individual life development and to resist a predetermined life (Wang et al., 2024). Their primary motivation for delaying employment is "enjoying the present moment," manifested as an unwillingness to enter the workforce and a pursuit of travel and leisure. This state is highly dependent on family economic cushioning and emotional tolerance (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). As Case 03 described: "Because I don't want to enter the workplace, I have a mindset of procrastination and enjoying the present. After returning from studying abroad, I want to delay entering the workforce, to travel, to have fun. Actually, I don't feel confused about my future career, but deep down I know that one has to work, so I won't take a break for too long; I will look for a job later." It is worth noting that the graduates who pursue "hedonistic" delayed employment benefit considerably from family economic and emotional support (Lai & He, 2023), which validates the critical role of economic and cultural capital in securing time autonomy, that is, a psychological safety net. As Case 03 further stated: "My family doesn't urge me to find a job, but they will introduce opportunities when I want to work. They also provide financial support. To be honest, my parents don't seem anxious on the surface, but inside they might be a little worried." Ultimately, however, most parents still hope that their children can find a job and follow the expected life course trajectory. At the same time, this group also experiences anxiety at pressure points of the social clock, such as the next autumn campus recruitment season, indicating that "hedonistic" delay is unsustainable and essentially represents a temporary deviation from the mainstream life course script.

Resolution Strategies for Delayed Employment

In summary, the phenomenon of delayed employment among college graduates is not merely a simple individual buffering strategy; rather, it is the product of complex interactions between broader social transformations and

individual choices, and, as such, serves as a concentrated reflection of the current intricate youth employment ecosystem. Passive delayed employment is rooted in the triple squeeze of economic weakness, education–market decoupling, and planning failure, whereas proactive delayed employment largely manifests as strategic waiting or psychological adjustment under conditions of policy buffers, family economic cushioning, and perceived overqualification. These two types are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can transform into each other under specific circumstances. For instance, active exam preparers who experience repeated failures may slide into a passive predicament. This suggests that policy interventions need to accurately identify the inherent heterogeneity within the delayed employment population. Therefore, this study proposes that addressing the predicament of delayed employment requires simultaneous intervention from two dimensions: external structural empowerment and internal motivational guidance. More importantly, however, it is essential to clarify the tensions and boundaries between the two.

External Empowerment for Involuntary Delayed Employment

For constrained involuntary delayed employment, the core of external intervention lies in alleviating structural pressures. Firstly, supporting small, medium, and micro enterprises as well as new economic sectors is a necessary but not sufficient condition for stabilizing the fundamental employment base. While tax reductions, fee cuts, and financing support can lower enterprises' labor costs, they cannot directly resolve the deeper contradiction of job skill mismatch. More critically, although incorporating flexible employment into the social security system may enhance the attractiveness of new economic sectors, it might also suppress enterprises' willingness to hire due to the pass through of institutional costs. Therefore, policy design must seek a dynamic balance between "job expansion incentives" and "employment protection." Secondly, supply side reforms in higher education have a notable lag effect. Adjustments to academic program structures and the integration of industry and education take several years to materialize, whereas changes in labor market demand are accelerating. This implies that supply side reforms alone cannot provide an immediate response to the current delayed employment crisis; rather, they represent a medium to long term investment, the value of which lies in preventing further accumulation of structural contradictions in the future. Thirdly, the precision of full cycle employment services faces the dual challenges of information asymmetry and algorithmic bias. Although big data driven job matching can improve matching efficiency, it may lock graduates into algorithmically preset "safe zones," thereby weakening their willingness to explore nonstandard career paths. Therefore, personalized guidance should not stop at job recommendations; it should also help students develop cognitive resilience in the face of labor market uncertainty.

Internal Guidance for Voluntary Delayed Employment

For voluntary deliberate delayed employment, internal guidance attempts to stimulate individual endogenous motivation through career education, psychological support, and the transformation of family roles. First, integrating career education throughout the entire academic journey is a reasonable proposition, but its effectiveness heavily depends on educators' capacity to update their industry knowledge. In many universities, career planning courses are still taught by counselors who lack practical market experience, and the content often becomes perfunctory. Without simultaneously improving faculty sensitivity to industry dynamics, such education may instead transmit outdated or one-sided employment information, thereby intensifying students' confusion.

Second, psychological support mechanisms aimed at fostering a pragmatic employment mindset face an ethical tension between "respecting autonomy" and "legitimacy of intervention." Universities provide psychological counseling for unemployed graduates with the intention of helping them clarify the boundary between "exploration" and "avoidance." However, if this support evolves into excessive tolerance of delay, it may weaken

individuals' sense of employment urgency. Therefore, psychological guidance should maintain a stance of "gentle urging" rather than "unconditional acceptance," emphasizing the finiteness of the time window and the reality of opportunity costs.

Third, guiding family support from "cushioning" toward "navigating" is an ideal direction for transformation, yet its feasibility is profoundly constrained by the structure of family capital. For families with limited economic endowments, "cushioning" is itself a scarce resource, let alone "navigating." For affluent families, delayed employment of their children is often a strategic arrangement actively chosen, leaving limited room for family intervention. In other words, adjusting the family role requires a stratified approach: for those lacking capital, the focus should be on providing information and opportunity linkages; for those with abundant capital, caution is needed to avoid the solidification of dependency resulting from "overprotection."

In the final analysis, the essence of delayed employment is a negotiation between individuals and structural uncertainty in the VUCA era. The solution lies not in eliminating "slowness" but in preventing it from solidifying into long term disengagement that can no longer be re embedded. The above analysis reveals a core judgment: constrained involuntary delayed employment and voluntary deliberate delayed employment are not fixed identity labels; rather, they are transitional states that can transform into each other over the course of an individual's life trajectory. Therefore, effective intervention strategies should not adhere rigidly to a dichotomy of "external empowerment only for the passive type and internal guidance only for the proactive type." Instead, they must establish mechanisms for dynamic identification and flexible response.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated the generative mechanisms and differentiated pathways of the "delayed employment" phenomenon among Chinese university graduates in the VUCA era. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 16 graduates across diverse institutional and regional backgrounds, the research reveals that delayed employment is not a monolithic experience but rather the product of complex interactions among structural pressures, individual agency, and support systems. Two core types emerged from the analysis: constrained involuntary delayed employment and voluntary deliberate delayed employment.

Constrained involuntary delayed employment arises primarily from macroeconomic weakness and insufficient labor market absorption capacity, education-market decoupling and major-position mismatch, as well as unfulfilled personal plans combined with an "exam preparation obsession" trap. These graduates possess a genuine willingness to work but find themselves trapped in a predicament of "no jobs available" and "slow and difficult employment" under multiple constraints. In contrast, voluntary deliberate delayed employment is shaped by elevated employment aspirations and robust support systems, including the policy buffer of fresh graduate status and credentialism competition, perceived overqualification and the pursuit of "dignified and stable" employment, career confusion and the need for psychological adjustment, and hedonic delay enabled by family economic and emotional support. This group experiences "having jobs but not taking them" or "choosing selectively among jobs", exhibiting strategic and agentic behavior.

Crucially, the study finds that the two types are not fixed identities but transitional states that can transform into each other over an individual's life trajectory. For example, active exam preparers who suffer repeated failures may slide into a passive predicament, while those initially forced into delay may later reframe it as a strategic exploration. This dynamic interplay underscores the need for nuanced, context-sensitive interventions.

The findings extend existing theoretical frameworks on delayed employment by moving beyond homogeneous conceptualizations and revealing the internal heterogeneity of this population. Moreover, the study highlights

how the VUCA environment, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, shapes graduates' risk perceptions, temporal orientations, and coping strategies.

This study constructs a dual path typology of delayed employment, providing a theoretical foundation for differentiated interventions. Whereas existing research tends to treat delayed employment as a homogeneous issue, this study distinguishes two generative logics: constrained involuntary delayed employment and voluntary deliberate delayed employment. The former originates from structural pressures and planning failures, whereas the latter manifests as strategic waiting and psychological adjustment. This typology demonstrates that the behavioral motivations and intervention needs of the two groups are fundamentally different. At the practical level, policy making should abandon a one size fits all approach. In addition, this study offers an explanation of the causes of delayed employment in the Chinese context, revealing the complexity of the reconstruction of the social clock. The findings indicate that delayed employment among Chinese youth possesses the dual attributes of strategic investment and risk aversion. On one hand, preserving fresh graduate status and upgrading educational credentials are seen as necessary investments to cope with credential inflation. On the other hand, gap year practices, unlike the exploration oriented model prevalent in the West, are highly focused on competing for shore landing positions such as civil service, graduate school, and doctoral entrance exams, reflecting an extremely risk averse social mentality. This alternative involution delay model creates tension with the traditional linear career trajectory, yet it is not entirely a negative form of lying flat. Furthermore, this study reveals the unintended consequences of institutional arrangements, providing cautionary insights for policy optimization. Specifically, this study validates how the fresh graduate status policy, beyond its original protective intention, has evolved into an institutional incentive that encourages delayed employment: a large number of graduates voluntarily forgo social insurance contributions and formal employment to retain this status label, falling into a repetitive cycle of exam preparation, failure, and re preparation. This finding suggests that policy design must anticipate the behavioral responses of strategic actors.

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