It Is What It Is

Qiangyu Lu

Interview with Ms. ZZ's Mother

ZZ, female, born in 1984. The only child in the family. Grade IV intellectual disability. Graduated from a mainstream school in January 2009. Started working at Shanghai Papa John's in July 2009.

Interviewee: ZZ's mother

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Predestination

Q: How are you, ma'am. Shall we start with when you first met your husband?

ZZ's mother: We were co-workers and met through someone else. I was 25 when we got married and ZZ was conceived 1 month later.

I didn't have any issue with the pregnancy. The birth itself was a bit slow, but it was still a natural birth because she was vacuumed out. If forceps had been used, it would have been a different story.

We didn't notice anything wrong when she was first born. Most babies cry immediately after they come out, but she didn't. She was deprived of oxygen coming out but was saved. Some babies can smile at around 1 month old, but she couldn't even smile at 3 months old, which we found strange. Then we gradually realized that she was slower than everyone else at almost everything.

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We took her to see some doctors, including the ones at the Children's Hospital. The doctors said to feed her some MSG to make her smart. We also gave her medication. I figured that the doctors could help improve her condition, but they couldn't really tell what was wrong with her. Her brain had already developed by that time, so we stopped seeing any doctors.

There are kids who grew up in the countryside and don't really have anything fancy to eat, but they're smart and can get into Peking University. It's all about the genes. Kids nowadays are fed imported milk. But at the college for seniors, I heard about this kid who grew up in a really thrifty family and just drank Guangming brand milk but still ended up having the best scores in the class. So it doesn't really matter what you feed the kids, don't you agree?

Qigong was popular back then, so we did it with her. You would do anything for your kid, right? But that was no help either.

We didn't know what else to do and were frustrated about how slow she was. Had we known she would turn out this way, we wouldn't have asked to save her when she was first born and was in danger. She grew up only to be bullied, and I can't feel good about that, can I? I am her mom, after all.

Q: In addition to not being able to smile, what other signs were apparent that she might be slower than the average kid?

ZZ's mother: I also found that she was timider than other kids. Maybe that's normal for kids like her. For example, we bought her an electric toy that could walk on its own, and that freaked her out.

Q: When she was young, how did she react when grown-ups approached her?

ZZ's mother: Her reactions were okay. ZZ was the first child to be born in this apartment building, so everyone loved her. Unlike other kids who looked smart, she was slow, fair-skinned and chubby. She did play and hang out with other kids on the block, and she got to go places that the other kids went, but she was just really slow.

We were both working full time back then, so her grandma took care of her. Her grandma didn't see anything wrong, she thought she was a very good kid. ZZ would do such stupid things that I almost wanted to spank her, but her grandma felt that she was just being a kid.

She started preschool around age three or four and the preschool teacher told us that she was slower than the other kids and couldn't get certain things done. In fact, that was when she started lagging behind the other kids including kids who were younger than her.

What happens in preschools everywhere is that good kids hang out together and the other kids are just brushed aside. So she ended up hanging out with a kid who wasn't doing well at school. That kid might have come from a filthy house because she had lice in her hair, and ZZ ended up getting lice from playing with her.

It's not easy bringing up a child like her. You try so much harder than other parents, but to no avail.

She didn't know her own condition. If she had known, everything would have been all right with her, right? Sometimes I would ask her jokingly, "Is there something wrong with you?" She would reply, "No." I would ask again and she would reply

“Yes.” That’s just how she was. But she is my child, so I have no choice but to face it head-on and always try to make things easier for her.

When she reached school age, she was required to take some kind of test. The school here is a very good one, No. 1 Central Elementary School of Jing’an District. But the school rejected her because she was not smart enough. A teacher there suggested that we send her to a special education school. “Maybe you can come back next year,” the teacher suggested. Some kids, especially boys, failed one year but got in the next year. Since she couldn’t go back to preschool, it was better for her to go to a special education school than stay home for a year.

I saw the teacher calling the special education school on the spot, “I am sending someone to your school. You have space, right?” It was as if the teacher called a favor for us and ZZ ended up going there.

She did pretty well there where some of the kids were even more intellectually disabled. So the teachers said, “She isn’t too bad and shouldn’t waste time staying with us.” She was at the special education school for 6 months or a year before the teachers sent her away to a regular school, X Road Elementary School, where she started from first grade again.

Once back at the regular elementary school, she was again the slowest, and you know what happens to the slowest kids. They get bullied and even the teachers ignore them. Her intellectual ability is way below that of the average kid, so she could hardly keep up.

We were young back then and didn’t know better—now I read about how to educate kids on WeChat. For example, if a kid isn’t doing well at school, the mother would go to the parent–teacher meeting and come back, instead of asking the kid why he isn’t doing well, saying, “You are doing great and the teacher said you have improved.” And the result is that the kid would improve, right? It’s the case for some kids. There are even inventors who were not smart when they were young.

That’s really just the way it is. It’s actually kind of funny—because we have a kid like this, we naturally pay more attention and would often see on TV or read in the papers how some kids with cerebral palsy still have a sharp mind and go to elite schools, even though their family members have to carry them to school. There are kids like that, right? Like [Stephen] Hawking—he is super smart even though his body is damaged.

Q: Back then, did you often help her with schoolwork?

ZZ’s mother: We did try to help her all the time, but she never remembered what we taught her.

She had a homeroom teacher who thought ZZ was the worst student and held the whole class back, so she took her to the Children’s Hospital to test her IQ several times. The score was 80-something. That’s lower than the 100 or more which is considered high, but not by too much. So she was kind of normal but the teacher said that she scored on the test by rote memory (laughs). Had her IQ score been really low, the school would have kicked her out. But her score fell within the normal range, so there was nothing the school could do.

The homeroom teacher later introduced a tutor to us who asked for 400 yuan a month—back in the 1990s that was considered quite a lot. We wanted to help her

improve and to make it easier for ourselves too, so we sent her to the tutor for Chinese and math. She went there after school, Monday through Friday. There were a couple of other kids with her and she went for at least a year. But there wasn't much the tutor could do to help. If a kid is normal, he can study on his own and won't need a tutor at all. But what could we have done? And what could ZZ have done?

Because she wasn't doing well at school, we had to suck up to the teacher. Like when her window broke, we had a sheet of glass prepared and delivered it to her house ourselves.

Q: She spent 5 years in elementary school back then, right? What about middle school?

ZZ's mother: She did go to a middle school, just one of those regular schools.

There was no test for graduating from elementary to middle school, so she went to the neighborhood school. She lagged behind all the time and had a really tough time catching up.

We hoped that the teacher would treat her well, so we tried to be very nice to her, like giving her gift certificates which seemed to have helped a little. It's like this at every school, as you know, although good students don't have to suck up as much. At your elementary or middle school, there will be kids who aren't doing well, and you know how it is, right? The teachers, of course, like good kids—I would be the same if I were a teacher. How many people do you know who really have a big heart? No one has really cared for them, who would have cared for them anyway?

She sort of graduated from the middle school and went on to a vocational school. Well, she didn't exactly graduate from the middle school. Back then, kids who weren't doing well at school could be diverted to another school without any tests. I was pretty close with her homeroom teacher because I always gave her gifts. So once I heard about this option, I asked the homeroom teacher whether ZZ should go to a vocational school, and she said it was up to me. I figured that since she wasn't doing well in middle school, there was no point in staying on because she couldn't have made it to high school anyway. I forget the name of the middle school. It wasn't as academically advanced as some of the other middle schools and the kids there weren't the smartest.

She left the middle school for a vocational school and I don't recall her taking any tests. So what should she focus on at the vocational school? There were many choices like jewelry appraisal, but none of them were right for her.

We had a neighbor who was teaching at a vocational school. We wondered if the school would arrange a job for her after graduation, as had been the custom. But as it turned out, you had to look for a job yourself. We were advised that since the Expo was going to be held in Shanghai, there would be a lot of restaurant-related jobs, so she chose hospitality as her major and has been in that sector ever since. It's not easy at all, but I don't know what other choices would have been viable for her.

After graduating from the vocational school, she got her first job at Lvyang Village Restaurant, if I remember correctly. Do you know that restaurant? It's pretty big and she worked there for a couple of years. At first she had to wash dishes—it's a very tough job but she didn't have to do it after a while.

There were still polytechnics back then. I read about those schools in the newspaper and figured she could give it a try. So she went to a polytechnic for 2 years and her

major there was Restaurant Services and Management, but the curriculum covered Chinese, math, and whatnot and didn't really prepare her for jobs after graduation.

So she did get a degree from the polytechnic, but kids going to this kind of school were not good at academics to start with.

Q: Was she happy going to the polytechnic?

ZZ's mother: She just did what she was told, she wasn't arguing.

Q: What was she like when she was going to school? Was she an introvert? Did you often take her out?

ZZ's mother: She was indeed an introvert. She would talk a lot sometimes, but what she said didn't quite make sense to me. That's just the way it was.

We did go out a lot, the whole family. Her dad really spoils her. Even now, you know, he calls her "babe girl" in Shanghai dialect, because she is his baby girl.

Q: Did she have a lot of friends at school?

ZZ's mother: She was struggling with schoolwork and was the worst student in the class, academic-wise. Because of that, as you can imagine, she hardly had any friends. She was almost always on her own. There's a girl living next door—they used to hang out sometimes but they're no longer in touch.

Q: If she didn't have any friends at school, would she be upset about it when she came home or become reluctant to go to school?

ZZ's mother: Not really, she still went to school. But I knew that she was very unhappy.

I felt really bad for her. Like she would go on a field trip and we would pack food for her or give her money and tell her to go buy KFC with her classmates. There were mean kids in her class who probably just took her food or money.

And she wouldn't tell us when she came back. I wished she had told us. Sometimes I would say to her, "If someone bullies you, you have to come back and tell us. If you keep it to yourself, you will get bullied even more." But the bullies must have threatened her, "You cannot tell! You don't want to know what I am going to do if you tell," so she was afraid to tell us. I saw how starved she was when she came back from the field trips and I knew someone had taken her money. She just wouldn't tell us about it, poor kid.

Q: So you could sense it when she was unhappy?

ZZ's mother: She couldn't express it when she was unhappy. She just couldn't. But sometimes she would talk to us about this or that.

Q: Hmm. Was she ever injured at school or in any fights with classmates?

ZZ's mother: Injured... yes, she was. Kids like her, they are slow not only mentally but also physically, like in their actions and reactions. One time someone pushed her and she fell and half of her tooth was knocked out. I think it was in elementary school. The kid who pushed her had a fever, so we just let it go and took her to a dentist ourselves. It wasn't easy getting the damaged tooth fixed, especially since it was a front tooth, but we just took care of it ourselves.

She really had a tough time, very tough.

Q: Did you drop her off and pick her up from school?

ZZ's mother: We did when she was in preschool. For elementary school and middle school, she walked. She was okay finding her way around, especially since the schools were close to where we live and we have never moved.

Q: Hmmm. Was ZZ interested in anything when she was a child?

ZZ's mother: Not really. I would count myself lucky if a day went by without her breaking something. She wasn't exactly being naughty or hyperactive, she just messed with things she had no business messing with.

When she first got her period, it was horrible because she would smear it on the wall sometimes. And I would just say, "Why don't you just rub it on your face?" I really said that.

You are too young to comprehend, but it's so tough having someone like her in the family. But what can I say? Parents with smart kids do not necessarily have an easy time, either—at least that's what we told ourselves to feel better. And girls are better than boys, right? Like you, girls listen really well.

Q: Have you and her dad ever thought about having another child?

ZZ's mother: Not really, and we couldn't have done it anyway. I might have regretted it, especially if we had a boy the second time around. You know, a son would need a house when getting married and things like that, it's just too much.

Combing Newspapers for a job

Q: So she worked at Lvyang Village Restaurant for a while after graduating from the vocational school, then went to the polytechnic, then got other jobs after graduation, is that right?

ZZ's mother: Right. Her first job was at Lvyang Village Restaurant and her pay was next to nothing. How many years ago was that? She made a little over 1,000 yuan, which was pathetic.

Her work schedule was slightly better than now. She came home around 9 p.m., and sometimes later. You know, the dish washers at restaurants are always the last ones to punch out. And she would walk home from work, about one or two stops if by bus.

After graduation from the polytechnic school, she worked as a waitress somewhere close to Jing'an Temple, if I remember correctly—the people there were awful. I don't recall the name of the restaurant, it's one of those places serving Hong Kong-style food. She started as an intern and once the internship was over, the place wouldn't sign any contract with her because it would have had to raise her pay—she was paid almost nothing as an intern.

And her teacher wasn't nice either. She wanted her to get a job at a public bath, and I was adamant about her not going there because the customers are all men—her teacher didn't really care what the men would want to do after they had taken a bath.

Then I was reading the newspaper and saw a Papa John's advertisement recruiting the disabled to make piazza dough, so she went. When she came back, I asked her, "Do you know how to do it?" And, this is what I don't like about her...she replied,

“Yes, I do.” She should have told me the truth if she didn’t know what to do. I would ask her every day, “Do you know how to do it?” and she would reply every time, “Yes, I do.”

She gets really frustrating. Month later the place called me, “ZZ doesn’t really know how to make pizza dough.” What was I supposed to do? So I asked, “She used to be a waitress—do you need a waitress?” And the answer was yes, so she has been a waitress there ever since.

She got some training in making pizza dough before she started working there, because that place really needed people to make pizza dough. I asked her sometime later and she told me she didn’t know how to make pizza dough, but she used to tell me that she knew. There’s really something wrong with her.

Q: Which newspaper carried this job advertisement?

ZZ’s mother: *Xinmin Evening News*. Its Tuesday edition often had a special section for the disabled, advertising jobs and featuring motivational articles.

I labeled her “disabled” later myself even when she didn’t have a disability certificate. When I was watching Special Olympics several years back, I figured that she must be intellectually disabled, because she didn’t cry when she was born and her brain must have been damaged from oxygen deprivation. So it was then that I went to apply for a certificate for her at the Disabled Persons’ Federation (DPF). We went there and someone talked to me about her and talked to her too. There was no IQ test on the spot, all we did was go there and then she got her certificate for Grade IV disability. Just like that, kind of funny when you think about it (laughs).

I don’t know if I did the right thing by giving her this label. I mean there’s clearly something wrong with her, but she wouldn’t have been a disabled person if I hadn’t got this certificate for her. So even now I wonder if I have done the right thing. I really wonder.

Q: Was her dad okay with applying for this certificate for her?

ZZ’s mother: He was kind of indifferent.

Q: How did she react to getting this certificate?

ZZ’s mother: She was indifferent, too. She just went with me to apply for it and I didn’t see any reaction.

Q: So you found her current job yourself, not through the DPF?

ZZ’s mother: Yeah. The DPF... it didn’t really help.

Before she started this current job, I went to the DPF for her certificate. No one there knew what job she should get or what job she could get. I saw the job advertisement in the newspaper several days later and took her to the interview myself. I went to the DPF again and asked the old guy there, “Why didn’t you tell me about jobs like this?” And he just replied, “Too many applicants.” Just like that, no one really helped.

Q: So she has been working at Papa John’s ever since?

ZZ’s mother: Right. That place has its own reasons for hiring the disabled, it’s to their advantage to do this.

Her salary is very low. I wouldn’t call it a salary myself—minimum pay, you know. She gets the minimum pay allowed in Shanghai.

When she first started, she was paid even less. Now, because it's October, she got paid a little more for overtime over the National Day holiday. Look here, I have all the information in my cell phone because her pay slip is sent to my phone every month. She was paid a little more last month, around 3,000 yuan, whereas her normal pay is just over 2,000 yuan.

As for the young men working there, I learned when we went to the place for a meeting last time, they can make 3,000 yuan because of overtime.

I believe she needs to work 167 h per month, and any day worked after that counts as a day and a half. I ask her to send me the hours she works every day and add up the hours herself. Once she hits 167, 8 h worked extra, for example, will count as 12 h, right? I don't double check the hours with the restaurant, I ask her to do it herself, after she has added up her hours.

She comes home really late sometimes, like around 10 p.m. She normally has a 2-h break at work, which is kind of a waste, right? It means that she is out of the house 12 h a day, leaving at 10 a.m. and returning at 10 p.m. Most days are like that.

Q: Does she get tired?

ZZ's mother: Of course, but what can she do? It would have been better if she got paid more for the hours she puts in, right? Sometimes I say to her, "You should be earning 20,000 yuan for the amount of work you do!" It would have been okay if she was making more, right? Her pay is really low.

Q: Does she get healthcare and social security?

ZZ's mother: She gets some every year deposited into her account.

The disabled... let me put it this way: you feel bad for them. They are paid so little, and the places they work at... you know how society is. If you are more able, people are nicer to you. If you are like her, then you get bullied, right?

Q: Has she been working at the same store all these years, or has she ever switched?

ZZ's mother: She did switch. She started at another store, then that store closed.

Q: Has she ever considered other jobs?

ZZ's mother: She has, but there are not many choices, so she has to stay put for now.

I often read *Xinmin Evening News* and the Tuesday special section for the disabled carried advertisements for jobs in other districts paying between 3,000 and 6,000 yuan, but those jobs were soon taken.

I don't know where else to look. Maybe on the Internet?

Q: Yeah, you can check online. Does she buy you little gifts when she gets paid, especially when she first started working?

ZZ's mother: She gave me all her pay when she first started working.

Watching Her Dating and Marriage for Protection

Q: We heard that ZZ is married. Which year did she get married in?

ZZ's mother: I think it was in 2011. They met in 2010.

They met through someone else, you know, the old lady you saw when you came up just now, her daughter bought a place here too. She wanted to play matchmaker for ZZ and we couldn't afford to be picky because she can't live off us forever. The old lady said, "This guy is good for ZZ." They seemed to get along well, so we didn't stop it (laughs). So they dated for a while and then got married.

Her husband is 8 years older, but it's good that way. Age gaps between celebrity couples nowadays are 20, 30 years, right? (Laughs) He works as a coordinator and coordinators do not appear the smartest for some people, right? Just tell me the truth. He only gets Sunday off but only works 6 h a day.

Q: She was born in 1984, so she was 25 or 26 when she met her husband. Did you monitor it when they were dating, or did you just let them go out by themselves?

ZZ's mother: I let them go out on their own. She went on some other dates before but those didn't work out. Some of the guys thought there was something wrong with her and just stopped seeing her.

She does meet other people, I mean people are okay meeting her and some of them feel that she isn't that smart. People either get along or don't get along, that's just the way it is, right? (Laughs)

I did monitor it closely when she was dating. She didn't date at the vocational school even though there were classmates who liked her. Have you met my daughter? She has good looks, people often tell me that, and good height. Actually, she is around 1.65 m and very fair-skinned.

She went out with someone at the polytechnic. Before they went on a date, I asked to talk to the guy. If my daughter was normal like you, I wouldn't have been able to meddle even if I wanted to, right? But I had to because she is the way she is. So I invited the guy over and said, "She is still in school. People have loose morals right now—if you get her pregnant, you will have to marry her." This guy told my daughter later, "Your mom is watching us." So he was very careful with her.

I mean my daughter isn't smart, so I had to set the rules for him before they got started, right? I have to protect her.

The guy told his mom sometime later that he found there's something wrong with her. His mom said, "I would rather you date someone physically disabled than intellectually disabled." Because life with an intellectually disabled is harder, right? The guy relayed the message and I said that I agreed with his mom. You have to be understanding, right?

Q: ZZ must have been really upset.

ZZ's mother: I don't think she was that upset. She asked me about it and I said, "Because there's something wrong with you." And she said nothing.

Q: Can you show us a picture of her?

ZZ's mother: Her picture? Let me see. I will show you... (gets up to look for a picture).

Here's her wedding picture. Wedding pictures are all big, I will get them for you if you want.

Q: She has short hair.

ZZ's mother: Yeah, she has always had short hair. She can't do her own hair so it's better to keep it short. I will get the wedding album if you want to see it.

Q: We want to see it.

ZZ's mother: Let me put this away first. (Leaves to get the album)

You can look at this one first. The other one is with them.

Q: (Looking at the album) Her husband has fair skin too.

ZZ's mother: He has dark skin and is chubby and short. For pictures like this, ladies always wear nice makeup, right?

Q: She has kept up really well.

ZZ's mother: Really well...maybe too well. Don't laugh at me when I tell you this. I clip her toenails even now, can you imagine it? She used to do it herself, but I didn't think it was very neat. Now I am thinking maybe I should let her do it after all, I am being overprotective.

Q: Does she let you do it?

ZZ's mother: She does. She just sticks her feet out and I will clip her nails for her.

Q: She is really pretty.

ZZ's mother: She looks okay. I haven't taken a good look for a long time. They got married in 2011, so it has been 4 or 5 years. (Picks up the album to study it.)

Happy Family

Q: Do they have kids?

ZZ's mother: No kids. I don't think she plans to have kids and I'll leave it up to them.

Q: Do you want them to have kids?

ZZ's mother: A little. At first I really wanted it—two kids would be ideal, one staying with us and the other with my in-laws. She lives with my in-laws and is very close to where we live.

Q: What about your in-laws? Do they want them to have kids?

ZZ's mother: They do.

They just don't have kids, not by intention. They both have something wrong with them, let me put it that way. The husband, too, I find that he is a bit slow. They are okay with not having kids, and they saw a doctor and were taking TCM for a while, then they just stopped trying.

Q: Does her mother-in-law like her?

ZZ's mother: She does. ZZ gets along really well with them and is more talkative than before. With me, I will let her know if what she says doesn't make sense. With them, she can let loose. People say that her parents-in-law and her husband spoil her—she doesn't lift a finger around the house because her husband does everything. Normally the wife does the ironing for the husband, but with them, her husband does it all including changing the bedding and cooking.

People say that despite her condition, she is blessed, but I don't want her to get lazy because of that. I used to go to her place a lot, now I don't do it as much, because I will be upset if I go. I mean, I get upset for my own reasons, because her room is

just such a mess and she won't do anything about it. She is the wife, how can she rely on the man to do household chores?

I really got mad at her at her place. I said, "Can't you at least dust the place?" But her parents-in-law would stop me and blame me for having too high expectations of her.

That's why I said that they really like her and spoil her. Normally, for someone like her, if the mother-in-law is picky, she won't hear the end of it. Even me, I'm not happy with her sometimes.

When she was getting married, we met with our in-laws as is the custom, and I told them, "My daughter isn't good at anything, and she even throws tantrums sometimes." And her mother-in-law immediately said, "I like her a lot." If they are okay, then I am okay, since I already told them everything upfront.

Q: What's her relationship like with you normally?

ZZ's mother: Her relationship with me... she is a little cautious around me but is also very attached to me. If I don't like some of the things she does, I will get mad at her. She won't react strongly to that but she will take it out on her husband (laughs), and it's really funny. Sometimes I figure that I should just let her be (laughs), because that's the way she is, and her husband doesn't seem to mind.

Q: What about her dad? He sounds like a hands-off dad.

ZZ's mother: Her dad... she is actually very sneaky. Her dad does try to discipline her while spoiling her, but she gives him a hard time sometimes (laughs) and the entire apartment building knows it. She is cautious around me and is attached to me too, I guess that's just human nature (laughs).

Q: How does she give her dad a hard time?

ZZ's mother: She calls him "country bumpkin" sometimes (laughs).

I don't know how to put it. She is intellectually disabled for sure, but not completely so. Sometimes I wonder, is she 30% or 40% disabled? And what's the exact percentage of her smartness?

Sometimes I would talk to the store manager and the feedback would be, "ZZ is not intellectually disabled at all." Maybe she does have some sparkle about her that you just can't ignore.

Q: Everything is good now. She married herself off and having kids is just a matter of time.

ZZ's mother: I won't put my money on the kids, really (laughs). Honestly, it's not going to happen and I don't want to meddle. It's no use anyway, since they aren't even trying. If they do have kids, we will definitely be the nanny, right?

Q: She has her husband to take care of her now and you have less to worry about, so all is well.

ZZ's mother: Yeah, I am good. I often go out and have fun myself. Both her dad and I are retired, I have been retired for more than 10 years.

Q: Does she still commute to work by bus?

ZZ's mother: Yeah, and sometimes her husband picks her up on an electric bike. I am against them driving that bike and I tell them, "Don't drive it, don't say I didn't warn you if you have an accident." But they won't listen. My in-laws drive an electric

bike too, so the four of them often go out on two bikes. It's always like that, and my in-laws are 10 years older than I am.

Q: What does she do at home on her days off?

ZZ's mother: She usually gets 2 days off at some stage between Monday and Thursday, and then has to work on Friday and Saturday which are busier days.

She goes out sometimes, to the park, like Changfeng Park, with her husband's family, or they eat out.

She visits me once a week, and when she does, I will cook and ask her to join me and talk with her. I was going to meet with you last Tuesday, but she had that day off, so I asked you to reschedule our meeting. I only see her once a week and if you came... you know what I mean.

Q: Yeah. Does she like to play on her cell phone when she stays home?

ZZ's mother: She was on her phone all the time. She played games and was very good at it, she even ranked. You know, people can connect on WeChat and play together, and someone who knows me told me, "Your daughter is very good at it." Then I told ZZ, "Don't play anymore. It's not good for your eyes and you won't get a pay raise for doing it, so why do you do it?" She listened to me on that one and stopped playing. Later on, people tried to get her to go back to playing and I told her to just ignore them.

Q: Does she like to post on WeChat Moments?

ZZ's mother: She doesn't bother with Moments, actually I am better at it than she is. I like to post pictures on WeChat. But she did teach me other things, like when I bought a Xiaomi bracelet and had to connect it with the phone. I didn't know how to do it and she helped me. She seems to know more about this kind of thing than I do.

If she needs information, she will look it up on Baidu search engine. And sometimes she watches shows on her cell phone.

Q: How much do you know about the place she works at now? Does she have co-workers she's close with who she goes out with sometimes?

ZZ's mother: She doesn't go out often. Occasionally she will go out with co-workers to sing, and she doesn't spend much. There seems to be a co-worker she gets along well with and she went to that co-worker's place last week. But people with her problems, they don't have many friends, generally speaking.

Q: Did she invite any co-workers to her wedding?

ZZ's mother: Not a single one. That's what I meant by saying that people like her really have few friends. I just saw a small card that's probably sent by her co-workers.

Q: Okay. How is her health? Was she sick a lot growing up?

ZZ's mother: Yeah, she was. People like her don't enjoy good health, and you know why? Because they didn't have a lot of physical exercise growing up. And I realized that fair-skinned people have poorer health than dark-skinned people.

And she doesn't quite know how to take care of herself. Her husband knows to dress warm. It's not that he doesn't care about her, he just has no control over her. She doesn't know to dress warm when it gets cold, so she often catches a cold and was always like that growing up.

With me, I seemed to have taken better care of her. With her parents-in-law, I found that... for example, I asked them to feed her a smaller dinner, but they said

that would be mistreating her, it was... (laughs) you know, you shouldn't eat too much for dinner, a small dinner is better.

Q: Her husband must really spoil her.

ZZ's mother: She has her husband wrapped around her little finger.

Q: So things are really looking up now.

ZZ's mother: Looking up... I still don't think her life is as good as others'.

Q: Do you have any expectations for her now?

ZZ's mother: I have no expectations whatsoever. I just hope that she can take better care of herself and enjoy better health, because she knows nothing about these kinds of things. She has always had a sinus infection, and I keep telling her to use salt and to wash with cold water. Her sinus infection is really bad and I feel sorry for her, looking at her runny nose every time she visits me.

She did something last year and didn't tell me about it until much later. I told you that she is cautious around me, and I know it. She probably felt uncomfortable with the sinus infection, and since you can get all kinds of surgeries nowadays, she thought about getting one for the infection. This kind of surgery actually doesn't help, she knew that I would be unhappy about it, so she consulted her parents-in-law and they took her to get it done.

She did feel much better immediately after the surgery. She had a lot of blackheads on her nose which were caused by the sinus infection—after the surgery, the blackheads disappeared, believe it or not. But they came back this year. So I told her, “The surgery you had didn't really help. You have to learn self-maintenance because that's how people heal, there's no quick fix.”

Q: Does she know how to dress up for going out?

ZZ's mother: Not really.

And I buy almost all of her clothes for her now. For a while she carried a card with her. You know she has a 2-h break at work, so she would buy clothes and boots at W Plaza where she works. People like her... of course we make these kinds of mistakes too... she always ended up with boots that were the wrong size.

I found that... or maybe it's because of my age, I don't know how to put it... I go to a college for seniors and I dress up whenever I go out, although you see me dressed so casual at home. So she couldn't get the right clothes for herself and I asked her to leave it to me and she listened.

Q: We will go to her store next month and observe her at work.

ZZ's mother: So you are going to the store. I found... sometimes I would tell her, “Can you not look so serious?”

When she visited me sometimes, I would notice that she had really dirty nails. I told her, “How can you face customers with such nails? You have to keep them clean.” But she just ignored me. I kept saying, “Clip your nails.” Someone gave me a nail clipper that keeps the clippings from flying everywhere, but she just wouldn't use it. On her days off, I would tell her, “Don't come to my place till you have clipped your nails. I really can't stand how long your nails are.” She doesn't have nice-shaped nails, otherwise she could have kept them long. So she would look neater with shorter nails, which is the way she should look since she works in the restaurant business, right?

And her hair—it's always so oily. I would tell her, "Can't you wash your hair since you are not working today?" What does she do at home on her days off? Nothing. I would get mad at her, "You just wait to be served on or spend all your time trying to get someone to go out with you or eat out with you." That's really what's on her mind a lot of the time.

Q: She doesn't cook herself?

ZZ's mother: No. She doesn't even know how to turn on the gas. I don't think she can do a good job cooking, so I don't let her.

Q: Hmmm. Since we will be observing her at her store, is there anything you would like to know? We can find out for you.

ZZ's mother: Not off the top of my head... or maybe you can ask her about her pay. Once she hits 167 h, does every hour worked after that count as an hour and a half?

And there's another question. She gets a year-end bonus, so how is this bonus calculated? We are almost done with this year, so I will let it go for this year. Next year... it's not easy getting access to the company. I will go to the company myself to ask if I still don't know how the bonus is calculated. Her bonus should increase year by year, but the company only factors 10 days or so into the calculation.

She won't ask about it herself. I would ask her, "Did you talk to someone?" and she would say "Yes." If I tried to intervene too often, the store manager would say, "Let ZZ handle it herself." They are growing up and we should probably trust them to do their own thing, but it's hard sometimes.

Q: Is she happy with the current job? Does she complain when she comes home?

ZZ's mother: She often talks about changing jobs. She wants higher pay, but I told her, "You are already used to working here, you should be happy about it because people might take advantage of you at some other job."

She wants to look for another job and even to exchange jobs with her husband. She gets on my nerves sometimes. But most of the time it's just talk, because what else can she do if she quits her current job?

Q: Do you still go to see her at her store?

ZZ's mother: I went once. I wanted to see her, so I went with her dad to her store to eat.

Q: We'll go inside to watch her, too.

ZZ's mother: Yeah, take a look at how she works there (laughs), she won't strike you as very smart.

Q: We feel that you are overall happy with her.

ZZ's mother: (Laughs) Not sure about happy. I have no choice.

Q: She has a good husband, and good parents-in-law.

ZZ's mother: How should I put it? I don't think they have a high quality of life, really. But they feel happy. I can't quite explain it, and nothing can be changed sometimes. I told you, I tried to teach her certain things but she wouldn't listen. So what can I do but leave them alone?

Q: You can go out and have fun with her dad.

ZZ's mother: Yes, we do go out.

She has vacation time every year too and she always goes somewhere when she is on vacation.

Q: I think we have covered everything. Thank you!

Interview with ZZ's Co-Worker

Interviewee: Ms. W

Interviewer and writer: Qianyu Lu

Interview date: December 16, 2016

Interview place: Restaurant where ZZ works

Q: Hi there. When did you meet ZZ?

W: I think it was 2014. I joined around 2013 and she came probably in 2014. I may have it wrong, though. But she has been with Papa John's longer than me, because she was transferred from another store.

Q: So you have known each other for almost 2 years.

W: Right. At first, I didn't realize that she was an employee being cared for. I just thought that she was childish and would sometimes have a child's temper, but I figured it was very normal. I was kind of surprised when I learnt later that she's an employee being cared for, but when I think back, it makes sense, because she is just like a child and will do things at work that should not be done.

Once I knew about her disability, I felt that I should have been more forgiving instead of being... sometimes we get busy, so I would talk to her pretty harshly. I felt really bad afterwards, especially since she is disabled.

And she has always called me "elder sister." It was only later that I learnt she is older than I am. She looks cute, so I never thought she was older.

Q: How did you know that she is an employee being cared for?

W: Hmmm... I think it was when she told me that if she goes to certain places, she has a certificate that can get her in for free. She said, "If you want to go, I can take you." She likes to offer. So I wondered what kind of certificate she has. Then she told me everything about herself, and I was quite surprised.

Q: You feel that she behaves normal most of the time.

W: Right, really normal. Because when she has something—I don't know how she is with other people—she would say, "I have this, do you want some? I can share with you." Just like that. I share my food with her too.

At work, if there's something that needs to be done, I would tell her and she would do it really well. So I trust her with her customer-facing job. I mean, with her out there, I don't worry.

Q: She does her job well.

W: Right. She does everything well, and she is really good with promotions.

Q: She can talk, right?

W: She can talk, and she likes to chat. I see her chatting with customers sometimes, and the customers would tell me, “You have very good services, thank you, thank you very much.” I am very happy whenever that happens.

Q: You just said that she behaves like a child sometimes.

W: Hmm... We have different sections here. Sometimes I would tell her, “ZZ, you watch section B today for me.” She gets a little unhappy maybe because she doesn’t want to watch that section. If she is unhappy, she will sometimes end up watching section C when I check on her after a while. I would then remind her, “ZZ, you are supposed to watch section B today.” And she would say, “I don’t want to watch that one.”

So she would behave like that occasionally, and I feel that’s what a child would do. Because usually when we assign work, everyone would say, “Okay, got it.” No one would say, “I don’t want to do it.” But she is like a child and she gives you the impression that she will say whatever is on her mind. She is often like that. A lot of the time, whatever she thinks, she will say it directly. She will tell me, “This is exactly what I think.”

Q: So her personality is on the outgoing and straightforward side?

W: Yeah, pretty outgoing. If she is unhappy today, she is just unhappy and will show it when she comes to work. I would ask, “What’s up? Not happy today?” “Yeah.” “Because of what?” Then she would ramble on. Sometimes it’s something at home, or she might complain, “It’s raining tonight—I didn’t bring an umbrella, but my husband can’t pick me up,” or she would simply say, “No, not happy.”

Q: It’s actually not a bad personality.

W: Right, right. I am okay if she is like that from time to time.

Q: During lunch break, does she ask to eat out with you?

W: Yes, I do eat out with her. I live close by and if I don’t plan to cook at home, I would ask her, but it has to be when she doesn’t bring her own lunch. She often brings lunch that her parents pack for her. I would ask her, “ZZ, did you bring lunch?” She would say “no” sometimes, so I would say, “Let’s go out to eat,” and she would agree. So we would eat out at some place inside the plaza and chat while we eat.

She talks and I listen most of the time when we eat out. She would tell me what is going on with her family—how her parents are doing, how her parents-in-law are doing, and how her husband is doing. She isn’t exactly complaining, she just tells me things. I kind of like it.

At work, she talks to me too. Like right now, we are trying to sell prepaid cards, and she would say, “W, I only sold a few cards today, what should I do? I am a little stressed.” She would say things like that to me and I would say, “Take it easy.” So random things would come to her mind and she would talk to me about them.

Q: I feel that she gets along well with all of you at work.

W: She is doing well, because she likes to talk and likes to laugh. And another main reason is that she is very forgetful. Like she would have an argument with you 5 min ago, and 5 min later, she would come up to you and say, “W, you wanna eat something with me?” Just like that, and you can’t even stay mad at her.

Q: So she is indeed like a child, right?

W: Right, she doesn't hold any grudges, which is really good. Because there are other employees being cared for in the store and they would sometimes hold grudges. If you are unhappy, you are unhappy, I mean... ZZ is really good about this and I am happy that she is that way.

When she makes a mistake sometimes, I would tell her directly, "ZZ, you didn't do this well." And I would ask her to think about it and say, "Let's talk after you have thought this through." I always tell her that and after a while, she would come up to me and say, "W, I know where I did wrong today, and I know what to do in the future." As far as work is concerned, I actually think she is doing a great job and she seldom makes mistakes. Also, whatever people tell her, she easily accepts it and follows the advice immediately. So I really think she is very good with this. That's why I was very surprised when I learnt that she is an employee being cared for. I mean, she is doing a good job.

I am very happy that she joined us. And I feel that maybe no one talked to her at other places the way I talk to her. She likes compliments, everyone does. If we are promoting something and her numbers are good, I would go over to her, pat her on the shoulder and tell her, "ZZ, awesome job today, you already sold this many, that's really good." She would be very happy and she would... for example, if you set her goal at five, she might beat your expectations and sell eight or ten.

Q: She super-performs with encouragement.

W: Right. She would do her job really well, which is something really nice about her. Because our encouragement is purely verbal and we don't offer any material incentive. So it's great that she can do her job really well and without any complaints. Some other places would give you extra pay or food items for doing a good job selling, whereas we give nothing. So she is very good about this.

Q: Is there anything that you wish she could do better?

W: Maybe she is too direct when talking to customers sometimes. Especially if someone says negative things about our food, she seems to take it really badly. I don't know if this is a good thing or bad thing about her. A lot of times the customers would say, "What you offer here isn't good." She would react strongly because it is not true. Sometimes the customers would say, "Your salad is such a small portion, did you do something to it before you served it?" That's not true, because our salad comes in individual boxes. We just empty the box onto the plate and we don't control the portion. When customers question, "Why am I getting less and less salad?" she won't have the patience to explain to them but would get on the defensive side and talk back, "That's not true! We always serve the same portion of salad."

Of course, she is trying to defend the company, but the customers will not take it that way and will feel instead that our services are bad. At such times, I would intervene and tell her, "ZZ, it's okay, why don't you take a break." I will then tell her that maybe she could have done better at this. I would also tell her that I don't expect her to change overnight and that it takes time. I feel that maybe I am asking too much of her.

Q: You have 1–2 h break each day. What does she usually do during the break?

W: If there's something going on in the plaza, she would go and watch. If not, she would just stay at the store to use the Wi-Fi to watch shows and play games. She

doesn't go out much because there are not many places for fun around here. Even if we do go out, we do girlie things like window shopping.

Q: Does she go out with you to buy clothes?

W: Not really. She told me that her mom buys all her clothes. "I'll look online and find things I like and my mom will just buy them for me." She doesn't have to do it herself because her mom knows her size and can just buy online and have them express delivered. It's really convenient.

Q: Her mom takes good care of her.

W: Yes. She comes over occasionally to check on her and I have seen her. She didn't come to eat, but her parents-in-law did. I forget how many times they've been in.

Q: Really? Does her husband come often?

W: She told me before that her husband picks her up after he gets off work. But he won't come in, he just waits outside. Her husband doesn't look like the outgoing type. He was really quiet last time he came to eat and doesn't seem to like to talk.

Q: Okay, I think we have everything we need now. Thank you for providing us with so much information.

Interview with Ms. ZZ

Interviewee: Ms. ZZ

Interviewer and writer: Qianyu Lu

Interview date: December 16, 2016

Interview place: Restaurant where ZZ works

Q: Let's start with when you went to school. Do you remember anything about it?

ZZ: Not much.

Q: What classes did you take?

ZZ: Everything, including Chinese and math.

Q: Did the school organize any activities?

ZZ: No, no.

Q: Did the school take you to the movies or on field trips?

ZZ: We went on field trips in elementary school.

Q: Where did you go?

ZZ: Probably Shanghai Zoo.

Q: How was your relationship with your teachers and classmates at school?

ZZ: Relationships... how should I put it? I would say that they looked down on me.

Q: Even the teachers?

ZZ: Yes.

Q: Did you have any classmates you were close to?

ZZ: No. Because I didn't get along with them, and they would say really mean things about me.

Q: What about at work now?

ZZ: I get along well with my co-workers.

Q: Your mom said that you even went to a co-worker's place, right?

ZZ: Yes.

Q: Which co-worker?

ZZ: She works in the kitchen now. I get along well with them, so I often go out with them. They don't look down on me. Before, most people looked down on me at school. My co-workers at least treat me as a normal person. But the schoolteachers wouldn't, and I was called "dummy" sometimes.

Q: The teachers called you that?

ZZ: Yes, because I didn't get along with them.

Q: Were you unhappy at school?

ZZ: Yes, of course.

Q: Would you talk to your mom when you were unhappy?

ZZ: I would.

Q: Your mom said that you are very close to her.

ZZ: Yes, I am.

Q: Hmmm, do you remember where you went to school most recently?

ZZ: I really don't.

Q: According to your mom, you went to a polytechnic, right?

ZZ: Right, I went to Shanghai CNST Institute of Continuing Education.

Q: What was your major at that school?

ZZ: Hotel management, or something related to that.

Q: How old were you when you graduated?

ZZ: I really don't remember.

Q: Did you work for a while after graduating from the vocational school?

ZZ: I did, at Lvyang Village Restaurant.

Q: Did you work as a waitress there too?

ZZ: Yes.

Q: What happened then?

ZZ: In the end the place didn't need people like us, so we were let go. I stayed home for a while, then my mom saw the job advertisement in the paper, so I came here.

Q: How long have you been working here?

ZZ: Many years. I think I joined the year before the Expo.

Q: Your mom took you to the DPF, right?

ZZ: Yes. The DPF kind of referred me to this job, so I really appreciate it, that people like me are given a shot at getting a job.

Q: You have always been working in the dining area ever since you joined, right?

ZZ: Right (See Fig 1).

Fig. 1 Ms. ZZ ready to welcome guests

Q: Do you think you are doing a good job at the restaurant?

ZZ: I am doing okay (laughs).

Q: How do you usually commute to work?

ZZ: By bus.

Q: How long does it take?

ZZ: A bit less than an hour.

Q: That's a long commute.

ZZ: Not too bad.

Q: Are the buses crowded?

ZZ: No, because there aren't many commuters at that time. Unless I have the 11 a.m. shift, then there will be some traffic.

Q: What do you usually do on your days off?

ZZ: I stay home.

Q: Do you go out with your husband?

ZZ: He is pretty busy with work, so we don't get to spend a lot of time together.

Q: You mean you two have different days off?

ZZ: Yeah, different.

Q: Do you travel with him?

ZZ: Yes, because I have annual leave.

Q: Do you remember where you went last time?

ZZ: Qingdao. We went there during Mid-autumn Festival of this year.

Q: How many days did you two spend there?

ZZ: Six days.

Q: How did you get there? With a tour group?

ZZ: Yes, we did. The tour package included round-trip flights.

Q: Who found the travel agency?

ZZ: We both looked.

Q: Did you look online?

ZZ: Not online. It's an agency close to where I live. I found it and it offers good packages.

Q: How did you like the trip?

ZZ: It was fun, we covered most of the tourist spots in Qingdao.

Q: Were there any places that you enjoyed more than others?

ZZ: I liked them all.

Q: Have you been to any other places?

ZZ: Ah... I've been to many places including Sichuan and Beijing. Hainan, too. We went there for our honeymoon.

As a matter of fact, it's pretty nice working here. The pay is a little low, but the other benefits are good.

Q: Did you go to Hainan with a tour group too?

ZZ: Yes, with a tour group every time.

Q: What do you think of your life now?

ZZ: You mean life after I got married or...?

Q: After you got married.

ZZ: Pretty good, because I get along well with my parents-in-law.

Q: Your mom said that your parents-in-law really spoil you.

ZZ: Yeah, they do.

Q: How do you get home from work?

ZZ: By bus too.

Q: Does your husband pick you up sometimes?

ZZ: Yes, with his electric bike.

Q: What do you do at home after work?

ZZ: I play with my cell phone. Everybody does.

Q: Like reading WeChat Moments. Do you like to post there?

ZZ: No, I don't. I just read them. I also read news on Tencent.

Q: Do you eat out with your husband on your days off?

ZZ: Seldom, because we have different schedules. Like he has Sunday off, but I have to work on Sunday. It's like that most of the time.

Q: I see. You have lipstick on—do you wear makeup every day?
ZZ: No, I don't.
Q: Who bought the lipstick then?
ZZ: The store manager.
Q: And she gave one to each of you?
ZZ: No, no.
Q: What is it then?
ZZ: She bought it on Taobao for all of us and we paid her back. It's a company rule.
Q: That's good. You look pretty with the lipstick on. Do you have any future plans with your husband?
ZZ: Not really.
Q: Do you plan to continue working here?
ZZ: Yeah, I just hope that we can get better pay. Other benefits are okay, so my mom really just cares about the pay.
Q: Have you thought about changing jobs?
ZZ: It's very difficult, for people like us. Because the employers will look at your information and will see the certificate for the disabled, which won't help.
Q: What kind of pay would be decent for you?
ZZ: We are on minimum wage now. I don't want too much of a pay raise, maybe a couple of hundred yuan per month. My husband brings home a little more than I do after all those deductions.
Q: Okay, I think we are done here. Thank you.

Observation of ZZ at Work

Observation date: 09:00–20:00, December 16, 2016
Observation place: Restaurant where ZZ works
Observer and writer: Qianyu Lu

Time	What ZZ did	Remarks
09:00–10:40	In the kitchen, she prepared the store for opening: setting the tables, washing the sanitizer bottles, and refilling the ketchup bottles	She had the morning shift today and had only 1 h for the preparation work She kept her own pace when working
10:00–10:20	In the dining area, she wiped the white mats and highchairs	

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Time	What ZZ did	Remarks
10:30	In the dining area, she started to fold napkins at the service station	There were no customers yet. She talked to co-workers or delivery people from time to time and expressed her own views Other co-workers arrived for work. The customer-facing ones talked to her and discussed how many sets of dinnerware should be put on the tables in the morning, and she talked with ease 11:10 She mentioned to the observer her low pay and hoped that the observer could deliver the message to the company Because the break was 13:00–15:00 today, she asked her manager if we could interview her after her lunch
11:15	In the dining area, two customers arrived and she immediately went up to greet them and hand them the menus. She then returned to the service station to continue folding napkins while a co-worker took the order	She greeted the customers in a warm and loud voice
11:20	A co-worker asked her for a bag and she got the bag from the cashier's station. The co-worker thanked her and she said "No problem."	After the co-worker left, she told the observer, "This is our store manager."
11:25	In the dining area, she finished folding napkins, put them in the bag and took the bag to the cashier's station. She then went to the hostess's station to wait. At the station, she organized the menus and occasionally checked on the customers at the nearby table	
11:40	In the dining area, she again greeted the arriving customers in a loud voice. She returned to the hostess' station to wait after handing the menu to the customers. The same co-worker took the order	She chatted with the observer occasionally. When her co-worker was taking the order, she told the observer, "She is doing what I normally do." The dining area is open with a direct view of the stores and people outside. She often fixed her gaze outside
12:00	In the dining area, no other customers arrived. She came over and chatted with the observer and talked about her worries about being interviewed. She then chatted with co-workers in a low voice	She had good logic and vocalized well. Her facial expression showed that she was cautious and worried

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Time	What ZZ did	Remarks
12:10	In the dining area, the customers left and she cleaned up the table	When passing the observer, she asked, "Will you interview my parents-in-law at their place one day?"
12:14	In the dining area, she ran to pick up the restaurant's ringing phone	
12:20	The manager asked her to go to the kitchen to refill several ketchup and Thousand Island dressing bottles	
12:25	She returned to the dining area and said to the observer, "Other restaurants are all full but look at us here..."	Two co-workers were chatting. She watched for a while before joining them
12:35	She fetched the takeout orders from the kitchen for the delivery person	Since it was not busy at the store, she would often get lost in her own thoughts and frown occasionally
13:00–15:00	She took her break	
15:00	She came back to work and cleaned up the dinnerware	
15:15	In the dining area, she changed the paper mats on the tables	She communicated and joked with the store manager (who was not the same person as the manager in the morning). She was in her element
15:30	In the dining area, she packed takeout orders	She also joked with delivery people
15:35	In the dining area, she greeted an arriving customer, "Hello, ma'am."	She chatted with a customer for about 15 min, and chatted with the same person again later when she was free
16:00	In the dining area, a customer came for a backpack left behind. She asked about the color, went to retrieve it from the cashier's station and chatted with the customer	She took the time to pour warm water for the observer
16:05	In the dining area, she took an order from a customer (on the machine at the service station).	
16:15	In the dining area, she took an order and explained to the customer that cheese sticks and durian cheese sticks are not the same product	
16:25	In the dining area, a customer she had chatted with asked her about something and she gave a brief answer as she was busy taking another customer's discount card number	

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Time	What ZZ did	Remarks
16:45	In the dining area, she greeted arriving customers, “Welcome and good noon.”	A co-worker corrected her, “ZZ, it’s afternoon now.” She was okay with the correction
17:25	In the dining area, she took orders	
18:15	In the dining area, she took orders and took payments	
18:37	In the dining area, she packed takeout orders	
19:25	In the dining area, she packed takeout orders	
19:40	In the dining area, she cleaned up the service station and wiped the tabletop and the white board	
19:55	She returned to the kitchen, punched out and got ready to leave	
20:00	She was done for the day and left	

Translated by Cissy Zhao
Edited by Andy Boreham and Zijian Chen

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