

THE PRICE OF A FREE DAY

A Freelance Life on a Chengdu Rooftop



John Doe

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by John Doe

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Based on “No Boss, No Money: The Raw Reality of China’s Gen-Z Freelancers” by Inside China Lives.

Original video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJZFUEQebbl>

An independent nonfiction adaptation of the supplied transcript. The account follows one filmed visit and the interviewee’s reported experience. Statements about the legality of the rooftop and delivery insurance have not been independently established. Verify source rights, names, facts, and any required permissions before commercial publication.

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Introduction: The Rent Comes Due

Jared can decide when to go to work. The landlord still expects 1,000 yuan every month.

That difference is the subject of this book. Jared is 28, lives with his wife in a rooftop room in Chengdu, writes software for clients, and delivers food when the coding does not bring in enough. He left an AI engineering job in big tech and the long work schedule he associated with it. His present life gives him control over his hours. It also gives him the job of finding enough money to keep those hours his own.

The problem is easy to misstate. From outside, the delivery uniform looks like evidence that freelancing has failed. From inside, Jared can choose a shift, turn down a shift, and work on the computer in between. Yet a choice made under rent pressure is a narrower choice than it looks. His household has two incomes, a cheap room, and an uncertain future. None of those can be removed from the calculation.

We will follow one household through the decisions visible in its daily routine: where to live, what to make

instead of buy, how to earn from code as AI changes the price of work, and when to ride for delivery money. The account is based on a filmed visit and Jared's reported experience. It cannot establish what all young Chinese freelancers earn or what anyone else should do. It does not supply a verified legal assessment of the rooftop or delivery insurance.

Consider the month's simplest worked example. Jared transfers 1,000 yuan to the downstairs landlord for a rooftop apartment with two rooms, a tiny kitchen, and a small bathroom. He says his current delivery target is also 1,000 yuan a month: enough to cover that rent. If he does not deliver, he may use the evening for himself or his software work. The immediate result is that the rent still has to come from somewhere else. That is the hinge of the story. It does not prove the delivery work pays every other household bill, and it does not reveal his full budget.

A common mistake is to call every hour without a boss a free hour. The useful question is which obligations follow that hour home. In Jared's case, rent provides an answer with a number attached.

You can now read each choice against the monthly bill rather than against an ideal of independence. Start with the place that makes the bill unusually small.

1. Rent on the Roof

The first problem is shelter: how can a couple live near work at a price they can meet? Jared's answer costs 1,000 yuan a month, but it rests on an arrangement he cannot describe with an ordinary lease.

He and his wife occupy a rooftop apartment above an older residential block in Chengdu. They have been married for a year, and Jared says he is in his third year living there. One room is an office; the other is a bedroom. The kitchen and bathroom are both small. The place is close to the hospital pharmacy where his wife works, a fact as significant as its low rent: less distance between home and her job is part of what the address buys.

The filmer calls the construction unpermitted and asks Jared who owns the roof. Jared says there is no official property title for the rooftop structure. He pays the person living immediately below by monthly transfer and says they have no contract. These are observations and statements from the encounter, not a settled account of the building's legal status. The video suggests the structure has remained because of

its age; it does not provide a document establishing why.

Cheap rent also changes what the tenant must accept. Jared describes a roof that leaks, although he says he can live with it as long as the water misses his equipment. There is no air conditioning. Foam board overhead offers little relief from heat in the filmed account. The landlord has not renovated the room. A low monthly payment does not make those conditions disappear; it puts their management on the occupants.

In a worked example, put the actual room and the actual payment together. The couple sends 1,000 yuan a month to the neighbor below, keeps one of two rooms for Jared's work, and stays near his wife's pharmacy job. The result is space to work and a short trip for her at a rent Jared hopes to earn through deliveries. What could go wrong is contained in the same arrangement: without a written lease, Jared cannot point in this account to a document fixing the terms, and a leak threatening his computer could disrupt the work the office exists to support. The film gives no basis for pricing those risks or predicting whether the structure will be removed.

The mistake is to call the room either a brilliant hack or a housing disaster and stop there. Its value lies in

the relationship between the rent, the wife's commute, Jared's equipment, and the couple's willingness to live with discomfort. Anyone comparing an inexpensive room with a more conventional one needs to ask what the smaller payment is making them manage themselves.

You can now identify the trade Jared made for a rent he can name. The next question is why controlling his day matters enough to make that trade attractive.

2. The Work He Left

The second problem is what Jared wanted to escape. His previous job paid within a company structure, while his present schedule asks him to provide the structure himself.

At 28, Jared is described as a former big-tech AI engineer. The filmed account links his exit to the demanding schedule commonly called 996. It does not name his employer, state his salary, or date his resignation. A responsible account cannot turn that absence into a dramatic departure scene. What matters for this story is the change in who decides what he does with an evening.

When the interviewer asks him to choose between full-time office work and full-time delivery, Jared chooses delivery. His explanation is direct: he has become used to freedom. In an office, he says, performance reviews and targets would tie him down. On the delivery app, choosing not to work means he earns nothing that day. He prefers that immediate consequence to oversight by a manager.

The preference does not eliminate friction. Jared remembers his first period as a freelancer as unusually energetic: on waking, he wanted to sit down and work. Later, he found himself lingering in bed or on his phone. He calls this laziness, then compares the fatigue with what he believes happens after years in a regular job. These are his interpretations of his own working life. We need not diagnose them to see the practical problem: deciding when to begin work is itself work.

Take an evening when he could ride deliveries. He can leave the app off and keep the time for programming, a meal, or rest. The action gives him an evening without a supervisor. The result, by his own rule, is no delivery pay for that evening. What could go wrong is to repeat this choice often enough that the 1,000-yuan rent target falls behind. The source supplies no diary of individual evenings, so the example describes his stated choice and its direct consequence, not an invented incident.

The common mistake is to treat the missing boss as a missing deadline. Jared still has a monthly landlord payment and clients who order code. He has exchanged one way of scheduling work for a more personal one, and must decide what to do when he would rather stay home.

You can now separate control of a schedule from the discipline required to use it. The next chapter looks at what Jared does with that control when money is scarce.

3. Making Do, Making Things

The third problem is keeping a cheap home and a working computer usable. Jared's answer is to build and repair, bringing his engineering habits into the room where he lives.

His home has no air conditioning. In earlier hot seasons he sprayed water on the walls with a manual pressure sprayer. He now shows the visitor a powered sprayer with an adjustable nozzle. He says he will use it indoors when the heat becomes unbearable, but also admits the summer has not yet fully tested his new method. That caveat matters: a prototype shown on camera is not proof of a comfortable summer. A camera close to the nozzle prompts the filmer to pull back because it is not waterproof.

Elsewhere, Jared demonstrates tools and electronics he can modify himself. He points out a soldering device and an ESP32 microcontroller, and says he wrote a script using PWM to control power output for a computer cooling system. He says this keeps his computer stable even under heavy load. The filmed visit reports his claim; it provides no independent stress test. His willingness to work on circuit boards is

still concrete evidence of how he spends the time a regular office schedule once occupied.

The system he seems proudest of is for music. He has built a custom sound setup and connected devices across his network. Music surrounds him while he codes. He says he now keeps the volume lower because someone has moved in next door. A room can be cheap and full of handmade things, and still be shared acoustically with other people's lives.

Here is a worked example of making do. Summer heat reaches the rooftop room; Jared moves from a hand sprayer to a powered nozzle he can adjust. The immediate result is a method he can demonstrate without buying an air conditioner. The part that could go wrong is precisely what he has not yet established: he has not seen how the setup performs through the coming summer. Nor does the visit establish whether damp air could affect the electronics he says must stay dry. Presenting the invention as a proven cooling solution would confuse curiosity with a result.

Meals show a less ingenious side of economy. For himself, Jared often eats packaged meals he says cost about 5 yuan each. When the visitor arrives, he has gone to the market for crawfish, and his wife cooks. Without room for a dining table, the couple uses a

surface near the balcony that also helps stop rainwater splashing inside. The guest meal reveals hospitality and ingenuity; it does not describe their usual diet. The filmer's nutritional judgments about the packaged meals are not independently documented here.

The mistake is to romanticize every workaround as a permanent saving. Tools cost money and projects take hours. This account gives neither a project budget nor a measured comparison with purchased alternatives. It does show why the room is more than an inexpensive address: it is where Jared experiments, repairs, works, and tries to make an awkward space livable.

You can now ask whether a workaround has been tested and what labor it demands. That question matters still more when the product for sale is Jared's coding time.

4. Coding Without a Salary

The fourth problem is earning money from skill without a salary underneath it. Jared likes writing code, yet says his client work has become less reliable and less able to meet the household's basic costs.

He takes online orders and writes software for clients. He is considering two paths: developing his own products or building products for other companies. He currently leans toward the latter. The visit names no customers, projects, contracts, fees, or finished products, so there is no basis for a model of his business. What it does show is a worker deciding what kind of work to seek next while still needing cash this month.

Jared and his wife together bring in around \$1,000 a month, according to the film. That figure is for the household, not Jared's software income alone. His wife's wages from the hospital pharmacy are not broken out. Jared's income from coding has declined from his first two freelance years, according to the narration. It attributes much of the fall to AI making code easier to produce and pushing order prices down. That is an account of Jared's market

experience, not a measured claim about every programmer's pay.

AI has two roles in his working day. He worries that work can become easy enough for another person with a good prompt to do it, reducing what clients will pay. He also uses AI to learn unfamiliar technology more quickly. When its output misses the mark, he says, he writes a sample snippet himself and feeds that back for improvement. If the system produces code that realizes his idea, he studies its structure. He does not give a percentage of code he writes unaided; when asked, he says it is hard to quantify.

A worked example comes from that described workflow. A client task takes Jared into an unfamiliar technical area. He can ask AI for an approach, write a small example when the response is unsuitable, and examine the improved output. The result, in his telling, is a faster route through a bottleneck that once required extensive reading. What could go wrong is equally clear from his comments: if he treats a quick generated solution as something no one else can produce, he may overestimate its selling price. The film does not show an actual client order going through these steps, so the example illustrates Jared's account of his method, not a documented sale.

The tempting mistake is to state either that AI destroyed his business or that AI rescued it. He reports lower prices while also using the tools. Both can be true for one worker at once. No invoice trail is available to separate changes in market demand, his hours, client mix, and AI adoption. The safe conclusion is narrower: his coding alone does not currently cover the household's expenses, and he has adjusted both his work habits and his earning mix.

You can now distinguish a skill he enjoys from a reliable monthly revenue stream. That difference explains the delivery uniform waiting for him outside.

5. Four Hours on the Road

The fifth problem is filling the gap between uncertain software income and a certain rent payment. Jared rides food deliveries because the app can turn an evening into cash, though the work brings its own limits and exposure.

During the filmed ride, he switches on the app and caps simultaneous orders at three because he is being filmed. He says he has carried as many as five at once. The map displays pickup and delivery points, and he tries to combine low-paying orders efficiently. None of this establishes a general rule for safe riding; it describes his method on the day the visitor follows him.

He says he can make around 23 to 30 yuan an hour during the evening rush. Daytime has gaps without orders. He recalls a best hour of around 50 yuan in torrential rain: five deliveries paying 10 yuan each, completed in just under an hour. Those are gross amounts as told in the visit; the source does not deduct expenses or establish how often such hours occur. His usual evening plan is to ride from about six until ten and bring in around 100 yuan. He imagines

doing it nightly to make about 3,000 yuan a month, then immediately says he cannot make himself do that. His current target is 1,000 yuan, roughly the rent.

The arithmetic is deliberately modest. At 100 yuan for an evening, ten such evenings would reach 1,000 yuan before any unreported costs. Jared reports working less and less, so that calculation is a way of understanding his target, not evidence that he actually completed ten shifts in any month. It also does not tell us what he takes home after equipment, electricity, repairs, or other costs; the filmed account does not itemize them.

The ride leads to a hospital. One delivery is for another rider who says he hit a rock and crashed. Jared later says this customer added a 10-yuan tip. When asked whether the delivery platform will pay the injured person's medical bills, Jared says he does not know. The film then makes conflicting claims about the timing and reach of insurance rules and the injured rider's expected costs. Those claims cannot establish what coverage this person had. The scene establishes an encounter with an injured rider and the uncertainty Jared expressed, nothing more.

Rain begins during the filmed trip, and Jared says he normally stays out when it rains. He recalls that his highest-paying hour happened in a downpour when few others wanted the orders. Bad weather can be associated with better pay on a particular shift while making the ride harder; his memory does not supply a risk rate or a dependable rain bonus. The visitor keeps filming. Jared keeps riding.

For a worked example, use Jared's own evening figures. He goes out at six, rides through the rush until ten, and says this can bring about 100 yuan. The immediate result is money he can put toward a 1,000-yuan rent transfer. What could go wrong is already visible without inventing a crash for him: orders may thin, the weather may worsen, or he may decide not to ride at all. Ten evenings at his stated figure is an arithmetic possibility, not a promise from the app.

The common mistake is to multiply one good hour by every available hour. Jared distinguishes busy evenings from empty daytime periods and his exceptional 50-yuan hour from his normal 23-to-30-yuan evening range. His personal decision to ride rather than return to an office depends on that unevenness, not on a smooth hourly wage.

You can now read the delivery figures as a schedule with variability rather than a salary. The last question is how that schedule fits a household whose plans may change.

6. One Household, More Than One Plan

The sixth problem is that one person's freedom is lived by two people. Jared's wife has a job near their room, shares its conditions, and is part of the household income that makes his flexible work possible.

The film introduces her as Jared's wife and says they have been married for one year. An earlier line calls her his girlfriend; the later introduction and interview establish how the couple is presented here, though the conflicting caption deserves a final fact check. She works at a hospital pharmacy. The visit does not name her, give her pay, or record an extended interview about how she weighs their choices. That missing voice matters when a story calls a couple's life one man's experiment.

The couple's reported combined income is around \$1,000 a month. Jared says his coding revenue no longer covers basic household expenses. The account does not establish how they divide bills, how much she contributes, or whether they hold savings. Every confident account of who finances whom would go beyond what is recorded.

At lunch, Jared has bought crawfish for a visitor. His wife cooks; they eat near the balcony because the room has no conventional dining table. Jared says that when she is free they have more substantial meals. The scene conveys care and practical cooperation, but one special meal cannot tell us what happens on an average day. He also recalls her father's initial reaction to seeing his place when their parents met; he says the father wanted to turn back. This is Jared's recollection, not an interview with her parents.

Asked about children, Jared says they are trying for a baby. Asked about pressure, he says having a child would increase it. There is no pregnancy or child in the account, and no way to calculate a future family budget. The plan makes the question more immediate: how resilient is their arrangement if the time and money available to either partner changes?

A worked example stays with the decisions we can see. The couple rents near her pharmacy job, Jared uses one room as an office, and both share the tiny kitchen and the roof's heat. The result is a workable home arrangement at 1,000 yuan a month. What could go wrong is not an invented argument between them but a visible limitation: a change in either person's work or their family plans would ask more of space and income whose capacity is already tight. The

source does not tell us how they would respond.

The common mistake is to call the couple a self-contained case study in individual independence. His wife's work, cooking, commute, and tolerance of this room are part of the terms under which his choice operates. The better question is what each partner has agreed to carry, and which details we still need from her before telling the story as hers too.

You can now treat freedom as a household decision with missing information. The conclusion asks what can honestly be learned from that decision without turning Jared into a symbol for everyone.

Conclusion: What a Free Day Costs

At the end of the visit, Jared says that once he has tasted freedom, he cannot go back. He also says that if he does not take deliveries, he does not get paid for that day. Both statements describe his life. Neither cancels the other.

The rooftop room lowers the bill that must be met. His wife's pharmacy job anchors the household near that room. His coding gives him work he enjoys, while lower and uncertain client income sends him out on delivery shifts. He chooses those shifts and sometimes chooses to stay home. The room, the work, and the right to make that choice depend on one another. The film does not establish whether the arrangement will endure. It shows a person living it now.

For a reader tempted by the word freedom, the useful question is practical: which payment comes due when the day is yours? Jared can answer with 1,000 yuan of rent. Your answer may be different. The point is to name it before claiming you have escaped it.

A short action plan

1. Write down the fixed monthly payment that most constrains your schedule. Jared's example is his 1,000-yuan rent. Use your own actual amount; do not substitute his for yours.
2. List every income stream in the household separately. The filmed account gives a combined figure of around \$1,000 a month but does not break out Jared's coding, his deliveries, or his wife's pharmacy wages. A real household decision needs those separate numbers.
3. Record a normal week of work and the hours with no paying orders. Jared's rush-hour 23-to-30-yuan range and remembered 50-yuan hour describe different conditions. Do not plan ordinary weeks around an exceptional hour.
4. List what the cheaper option asks you to maintain. The rooftop room comes with heat, leaks, and an informal payment arrangement in Jared's account. Name the actual maintenance, documentation, and uncertainty attached to your own choice.
5. Ask each person affected to describe the bargain in their own words. Jared's wife has work and a shared home, but her full account is missing. Make room for the person whose side has not been heard.
6. Revisit the plan when a material condition changes: a client stops ordering work, a partner's job changes, or a family plan becomes real. The film does not supply a

rule for what to do next. It shows why a schedule should be reconsidered when its supporting facts change.

The aim is not to reproduce Jared's life. It is to understand the exact obligations that make a free day possible, then decide whether the day is worth their price.