

Interview

I went for the interview at S Company on my third day in Beijing. I had spent the two days before settling in and, straight out of bed on the morning of the third, uploaded my résumé to the job-search site 58.com. It was March 20. I received the phone call before I had even eaten lunch.

The woman on the other end made it clear immediately that she wasn't from the employing company but from a headhunting service under 58.com's banner— a subsidiary. At first, I assumed she was trying to sell me something, but she assured me that her responsibility was to help to connect people seeking jobs with companies offering them. She had looked over my résumé and believed that I was a suitable candidate to refer for an opening at S Company, a parcel service. If I had time in the afternoon, she continued, would I be available for an interview in Yizhuang? She would text me the address.

Yes, I answered, without a second thought.

Putting lots of hours into finding the best job didn't seem worthwhile, as far as I was concerned. My qualifications would never secure anything with good pay, and S Company was a far better prospect than the worst- case scenario I'd been imagining.

I was about to set off for Yizhuang when another call came. A different woman asked me if I had any interest in trialing for a position at D Company.

I told her that I had officially left D Company not a week earlier, and the manager had said at the time that it normally took former employees a minimum of three months before they could find new employment. Did moving cities cancel this out, I wondered aloud.

She didn't answer. I had included my employment history on the résumé I posted online, along with my D Company leaving date, so she can't have read it very carefully. After some faltering, she said she would look into this for me and follow up later. Unsurprisingly, she didn't contact me again.

My interview would turn out to be the only time I ever went to Yizhuang. The location was an industrial park open to the public, surrounded by an enormous factory area. The S Company building stood on the roadside looking a little worn down. It was very obviously a site where manual labor took place. But oddly, there was nobody around.

I remember there being a dozen of us applicants standing in a room listening to a manager speak. But whether there were any chairs in there or we just felt too awkward to sit down, I'm not sure. Anyway, the manager also remained standing. I never quite figured out whom or what he managed, but he was the only person we interacted with the whole time. He took a casual tone with us. He too had been a courier once, he said, had worked his way up from there, and now he was in HR. The point he probably wanted

to put across was that we started in the same place, him and us, workers all of us, and we too could get to where he was one day.

So, we gathered around him in a circle and listened attentively. He raised his voice to make sure everybody would hear, like he was a tour guide announcing the local sights to a group of paying customers. His job wasn't all that different from a tour guide's, come to think of it. There was a lot of talk online, he explained, about couriers having long earned more than ten thousand yuan a month, and people had inevitably begun to assume that delivering parcels meant a high income— this was certainly true for some couriers, but they were in the minority. New hires who hadn't yet built up a network of clients wouldn't be able to make so much for quite a while. But he was quick to add that the company guaranteed a minimum of five thousand yuan for the first month.

He went on to say that it was demanding work, with difficult customers and long hours spent outside regardless of the weather. That people normally think it's a walk in the park, until they try it and find it's too tough, even for them . . . Clearly, he was less concerned that we were underqualified or that we looked down on the job, and more that if we were going to quit after a couple of days anyway, we were better off doing it then and there. That's how it sounded to me. But I never had any illusions about five-figure pay or an easy time, and neither did the others, I assume, since nobody walked out disappointed or asked a question.

Satisfied that we were all tempering our expectations, the manager produced a stack of forms for us to fill in. After we'd done this, he let us choose which nearby depot we wanted to report to. He did so by reading out the names of all the ones in the area with vacancies, and we raised our hands to register. The first name he read was for a place I'd never heard of, though this was no surprise since I didn't know 99 percent of Beijing. A part of me worried that he might reach the last site on the list without me having recognized a single name—what would I do then? But luckily the very next place he pronounced was Liyuan—right where I was staying. Beijing being as big as it is, and with so many districts and neighborhoods, I couldn't believe he would say my new home second. This was fate giving me a shove in the back, so up my hand went.

Once I had the depot address and the phone number of the person in charge, I confirmed on Gaode Maps that it was only a twenty-minute walk between there and my place. Seeing that it was still early, I decided there was no point in delaying another day. I called L, the depot director, to confirm I would be there soon to sign in, but the Beijing traffic decided to teach me a lesson. I hit the evening rush heading back from Yizhuang, and after being stuck for two hours I had to phone the director again to say I wouldn't make it in until the next morning.

Beijing in March could still be biting cold. The temperature sat around a dozen degrees lower than the southern city I'd left behind. I traveled the following morning to a neighborhood complex along Yunjing South Avenue where the Yunjing depot was located. Director L's office was on the second floor. Before I entered, I saw there were also depots for JD.com and D Company next door. These gated residential complexes were popular among businesses needing office or storage space. It must have been all the comings and goings of the various companies' trucks that got the sidewalk so cracked and potholed.

Director L oversaw four of the company depots in the area, including the one in Yunjing. In that first meeting, I discovered there were still questions I had to answer for what must have been the official interview to be complete.

L wore thin-framed glasses and looked to be around forty years old. He smiled politely when he spoke. He can't have been very busy that day, because he seemed in no rush to get to the point. The issue was, I hadn't mentally prepared myself for one-on-one conversation, so he did most of the talking, and I just answered his questions.

I told him where I was from, how long I had been in Beijing—just four days, I said—and he asked me why I wanted to be a courier. In fact, I wasn't convinced that I did want to be a courier. If there had been a better option, I would have gone for that, instead. This wasn't the answer he wanted to hear though, clearly, and I didn't dare risk it. But I still made a mistake. I should have led with how I'd always been impressed by S Company—joining a company you like is a perfectly reasonable thing to do, and this would have been a fine answer. But my nerves got the better of me and I said it was because I was staying nearby and I didn't want to travel far to work. Now this was true, of course, but it wasn't the whole truth—of the jobs available to me, being a courier also offered the best pay. But it came out like I didn't care, like I was only there for an easy time, and hadn't given much thought to the decision.

Sure enough, L took umbrage. How long was I planning to stay in Beijing, he probed, the insinuation clear. Why had I come here in the first place? Once I gave my responses, he moved on to my home situation and my parents' ages and if I had any children. I knew what he was worried about, so I made sure to be extra careful in my further answers. I thought he'd be happy with what I said, but he just insisted that this gig wasn't as good as I was imagining.

I wasn't imagining it to be good at all, I admitted.

He then explained that delivering parcels is a lot of hard work.

I wasn't afraid of hard work, I told him. My last job had been much tougher than delivering parcels.

Talk like this made me feel awkward. I knew what he was so concerned about: that I would do the job for a few days, then vanish. Enough people did, apparently, and it must have given him a headache. From our conversation up to this point, he had learned that I didn't have children, and that my parents had medical insurance and pensions and had no need for my support. I had very few obligations. This put him on guard. It surprised me that he was so sensitive to this sort of thing. He was clearly worried that if anything infelicitous happened while I was at work, I could simply quit, instead of bearing the brunt, and not worry about the effect on others. On top of this, he probably thought that I sounded too refined when I spoke, compared with other new recruits. He might have been cultured himself, but I later got the sense that he preferred his delivery drivers to be coarse, since they were less likely to have a surfeit of confidence. Later on, I would see for myself how self-esteem could be a hindrance to work.

Looking back today, I can understand his attitude and why he treated me the way he did: If I had been in his shoes, I would have done the same if it meant doing a good job. He tried dissuading me, but gently, since like me he wasn't the type to be blunt. And, critically, he would have needed a very good reason for turning me away after I had already traveled to Yizhuang and been assigned to him. But he took me on, in the end, even if he seemed reluctant, and put me down for a trial the next day at the nearby Linhe depot.

Trial and Onboarding

S Company's Linhe depot was once genuinely by the riverside, as the Chinese name suggested, but when the site was closed after failing a fire safety inspection, it was moved to the back yard of an office building kitty-corner to Liyuan metro station. Only the name remained. I learned this from Gao. He was the courier who took me out for my trial shifts—he was my shifu—even though he was much younger. He was born in the northeast in 1995.

Gao covered part of the area where Liyuan Middle Street and Yuqiao East Road met. He was responsible for the Xingfu Artspace, Wellspring Gardens, and Yuqiao East neighborhood complexes. The three neighborhoods stood right up against each other, separated only by metal fences.

The first time I rode on the back of Gao's electric trike, he told me that he actually had two trikes for making deliveries. One of them was having issues and was sitting at home, so he had taken one of the depot's. "So- and-so has been working here for almost ten years, and he still drives that same piece of junk he did when he started. And I have two trikes of my own," he boasted, proudly.

It seemed like a strange way of looking at the situation to me, treating the vehicles as if they were his personal property. I've forgotten the name of the colleague in question now because I ended up rarely working with him, and I didn't try to confirm if he had really worked there for ten years, either. But his trike definitely stood out as different. It was an older model. I didn't know at the time that Gao was in an ongoing dispute with the depot staff for having made off with the extra trike. He and his girlfriend drove it to do their groceries during his breaks, he told me with just as much pride. He was clearly delighted with the "perk" of using a company vehicle for personal errands.

The S Company trial was unpaid and lasted three days, but there was no requirement during it to do any work. The idea was simply to shadow shifu. Though in reality, of course, I had to help— who would be brazen enough to stand back and watch, without lifting a finger? So, Gao and I worked together. He parked outside an apartment block, and we took a staircase each. Gao knew the neighborhoods well and filled me in on which places the residents would be home and which they wouldn't; and if nobody was going to be in, where I should leave the parcel: in the entranceway, on the shoe rack, or inside the box for the electric meter . . . The job seemed easy at this point. A good memory and time were all that were needed to learn an area and find your flow.

On my third after noon of the trial, I carved out some hours to go for a checkup at the hospital affiliated with the China Construction Second Engineering Bureau, next to the depot. I was told I could collect my results in three days. If I had known I would have to wait, I'd have done the checkup before starting the trial. Instead, I lost out on a day's work.

Fortunately, Gao got in touch the next morning to ask for help with an overly large assignment he would struggle to finish on his own. I had nothing else going on, and it was a good opportunity to familiarize myself with the neighborhoods, so I went along. When we were done, he took me to a nearby market, where we had lunch at Chengdu Staples. His way of saying thank you. I had worked for free, so I didn't argue.

There were six members in Gao's team altogether. The other drivers covered Binjiang Royal View, Jingyi Clearsky Gardens and Meiran Baidu City. After the morning scramble, with fewer parcels to deliver in the afternoons and time not as tight, the team would meet by the gate for Binjiang Royal View and shoot the breeze while they waited for the next drop.

That afternoon there was another new recruit there, a young guy assigned to the south side of the neighborhood, who told me, "If you slip the nurses an extra fifty yuan, you don't have to wait for three days for the medical report. It's ready the next day."

"The nurse didn't say anything when I asked if they could do it quicker," I said.

“They drag it out on purpose, to make more money. Asking is no good, you have to just pay. She won’t say anything, otherwise. It’s against the rules.” This was his experience, anyway. It was up to me if I believed him or not, but he gained nothing from lying to me. Still, I trusted the nurse I had spoken to, she looked like she took her responsibilities very seriously. At the end of the shift, Gao arranged for me to come back and help out the next day as well. I was happy to.

After finishing our deliveries the following morning, I went to the hospital and collected my medical report, which I then submitted to the depot manager. This was Z. I quickly got the impression that Z wasn’t the friendliest person, or much of a talker. Besides ignoring most of the questions I asked him, he barely looked at me. I felt like a junior school student talking to a teacher. Obviously, I had done nothing wrong, but I couldn’t shake the feeling he was being condescending. I had completed two days of interviews, then three days’ probation, so by the time the physical report was ready another three days later, it was already March 27.

Manager Z made me sit off to the side while he used the computer on his desk, though I couldn’t say if it was for anything to do with me. After a bit of a wait, he informed me that there were no more vacancies for March. The soonest I could start was April 2. Now is when you decide to tell me there are no openings, I remember thinking. Regardless of whether this made sense or not, it showed a fundamental lack of respect. If there were no jobs going, then why advertise for hire? There wasn’t even a hint of an apology in his voice either. His expression just said: Do you want to do this or not?

First thing the next day Gao called again, asking for a favor. The depot was pushing him to return the trike he had commandeered, and he needed a hand with the older one, which he still had to take to be repaired. From how frustrated he was when I found him, I assumed he’d had another argument with the depot staff. I got the sense he belonged to the less disciplined and more troublemaking contingent of the workers in our area.

We towed the broken trike with the working one to Chunjia Alley Park neighborhood off Linhe Inner Road, where there was a mini repair shop with a door no bigger than a yard wide. Gao left me behind to wait while he went to do his rounds. I sat there twiddling my thumbs, looking around at the inside of the shop. I still remember it now: the pitted cement of the floor and its oily black sheen. The various vehicle parts piled in a muddle up against the walls (though the owner might well have seen some order there).

There were two customers who came by for batteries: an older woman who collected the one she had reserved and handed over six or seven hundred yuan, which was less than I’d expected, and a middle-aged man who eventually left without buying. I remember trivial details like those, but not why Gao wanted me to wait there. Once the trike was with the mechanic, it made no sense for one of us to stay.

The trike didn't even end up being fixed at that shop. The guy spent a long time running tests, only to conclude he didn't have the right parts. So, at noon we dragged the thing to Liyuan East Inner Market where there was another, bigger shop. Business there was good, and there was a line, so we went to eat lunch first and only waited a short while for our turn when we came back.

But this shop couldn't do the job either. Something about the part that was needed not being universal. S Company used Zongshen brand trikes, and we would have to order a replacement straight from the manufacturer. It was four or five o'clock by now, and I had wasted most of the day, with no hope of repairing the trike, and Gao wouldn't finish his deliveries in time to pick me up. I told him the situation and he asked if I would push the trike from the market back to the depot. It took me almost an hour.

I also worked the next two days for nothing. Gao seemed to really depend on me. There wasn't a day he hadn't messaged for help. He must have thought I could be trusted, me being older than him. Or he didn't get along with the rest of the team and preferred a newcomer at his side.

To work more efficiently, we split up: I filled a sack with parcels and rode a shared bike with it slung over my shoulder, while he drove on the trike to take care of another spot. We met up when we were done.

With Gao needing my assistance all of the time, I naturally assumed that I would stay in his team once I had officially onboarded. I was already starting to get to know the area and my colleagues there, which would only make the work easier. But this is not what happened. The trial allocation had been random, and I wasn't assigned to his team afterward.

"You'll be working for free, for now, then," said one guy in the team, when he heard my situation. It confounded me.

This was a team leader. Let me explain: These so-called leaders were not leaders in any official capacity, and the role came with no benefits. In most cases, it was filled by the longest-standing member, who was responsible for keeping the workload even across the team and acting as the go-between with the depot staff. The reason they were willing to do these extra tasks without remuneration was that they had already secured themselves the best neighborhoods in their area. So, either they earned more than their colleagues or they had the easiest time—or they had found the ideal balance between the two. This same leader, who'd told me to work unpaid, said that this is what he had done for ten or so days when he first started, because no one had let him know about onboarding or that he wouldn't earn a fen until he had spoken to the manager.

He told me a day later that he worshiped President W, the head of S Company, because every Spring Festival the president selected the hundred best frontline workers out of

four hundred thousand nationally, and flew them on chartered planes to headquarters for the New Year's party. He longed to be picked one year. He wore such a sincere and hopeful expression when he said this that I didn't know how to respond or what to talk about with him. The rest of the team didn't really seem to like him anyway, so I did my best to steer clear.

When Gao texted once more, the following morning, to see if I would join him on his rounds, it was with a proletarian sensibility that I replied, saying something had come up and I couldn't help him out anymore. I stayed in for two days instead, cooking and cleaning, going out only to do the groceries.

Then it was April 2. I started the day at the Linhe depot where I requested a signed employee registration form from Manager Z. At one o'clock in the afternoon, I then went to the Yunjing depot to find Director L. But he wasn't in his office. Stuck on the door was a notice: "Onboarding from 2 p.m. onwards."

The door of the neighboring conference room was open, so I sat in there while I waited. A succession of other applicants started to arrive soon after. Every one eyed each other curiously, then turned their attention to their cell phones. No one spoke. At close to three o'clock, or maybe already past, Director L strolled into his office chatting with two assistants. They had just gone for lunch. One of the assistants, a woman, was a financial administrator who was also responsible for onboarding us. While she had been all smiles and chitchat with her colleagues, her face hardened the moment she saw us waiting. She made no effort to hide her contempt.

When it was my turn, she checked the system using the documents I handed over, but she couldn't find my name there. Apparently, Manager Z had given me an onboarding form but failed to submit the application for me in the HR system. She told me to talk with Manager Z again, then she scanned my documents while she had them at hand. Doing so, she saw that in my blood test report there was a note about my "neutrophil count" being marginally above normal.

"You failed your physical," she said, pointing at the report, without a flicker of emotion. "We can't hire you."

I hurried straight from the office to the hospital. The physical examination department was in a standalone building behind the outpatient department. I went inside and found an on-duty doctor. "Why is my rate for this outside the normal range, but it's written in the report summary that everything is fine?" I asked.

The doctor looked over the report. "S Company turned you down because of this?" he responded in a surprised tone.

Yes, I said.

“But this doesn’t affect anything,” he said. “The count fluctuates even if a healthy person just has some slight inflammation somewhere. It will return to normal after a few days. Turning you away for this is ridiculous.” He repeated that last word several times while shaking his head, “ridiculous,” but whether it was truly ridiculous or he was only trying to console the angry-looking man in front of him, I couldn’t be sure.

“Can you change it for me, since it’s normal?” I asked.

“I can’t do that,” he answered, without pause for thought. “There are rules.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“You will have to have another blood test,” he said.

But it would cost money to have another test. “Will the result be the same, though?” I asked.

I didn’t need to worry about that, he replied quickly. He guaranteed me it would be fine. This was a strange thing to say, I thought at the time. How could he guarantee this? What if there was still inflammation somewhere? But I listened to his advice and went for a second blood test the following morning, because what else was I going to do? Then I headed back to Linhe depot. Manager Z was out, so I asked the only assistant there if she would register my name in the onboarding system.

My test results came back the same after noon and, sure enough, I was all clear. I realized I hadn’t needed to wait three days for the report the first time around. The blood work was the only item on the form that supposedly took a little longer to complete. Even if they’d taken my blood in the afternoon, I should have had the results by the morning. This extra test had cost me another fifty yuan. Maybe the young courier was telling the truth when he warned me that there was something off about this clinic.

On the morning of April 4, I made my third trip to Director L’s office. This time, the scowling finance clerk was on leave and unable to onboard me, so Director L told me to come back another day.

Fresh to Beijing and still jobless, I had a lot of free time on my hands, and I spent my evenings keeping a simple diary. All I really recorded over those days were the journeys I had made, rather than any of my thoughts or feelings. Rereading the entry for this particular day now, I don’t recall what came over me, but I ignored what L had said, and went to the Linhe depot to speak with Manager Z. Generally, I rarely disregard others’ advice. But I probably didn’t trust L anymore, by that point.

It was a half-hour walk between the depots. When I found Z, he told me that if I was in a hurry, I could try onboarding at the company HQ. S Company's Beijing headquarters were located in an Airport Logistics Park in Shunyi District, twenty miles from Liyuan. I left right away but still didn't arrive until the afternoon. The HR staff there were all young and well-mannered and, unlike the depot staff, highly educated. They gave me a very warm welcome. This was the first place where I got the impression that S Company was a modern operation.

They asked me why I had traveled all the way there for onboarding. I said that the assistant in Liyuan wasn't at work today. "Her again," one of them mumbled. It seemed that the assistant often took leave. They then discovered that the admin at Linhe depot hadn't sent in the scans of my ID, so they couldn't complete the process.

I contacted her. "There's no reason that I wouldn't have submitted them," she replied on the call, "I definitely sent them over yesterday." The HR staff checked again and worked out she had emailed my documents to one of the team's individual addresses instead of the team inbox like she was supposed to. I took out my ID and asked them to scan it then and there. They told me that I needed to have my ID verified at the public security bureau first, and confirmation wouldn't come back the same day. It was the Qingming Festival tomorrow, and then it was the weekend, which meant I had to wait three more days.

I was in my head the whole way home about whether these hurdles were just a streak of particularly bad luck, or if there was someone— Director L, for example—who was orchestrating them. Given my sour mood, I was leaning towards it being the director.

Half a month had passed since I first went to Yizhuang for the trial, on March 20. For all that time, I had been genuine about wanting to join S Company and hadn't looked for any other job. I had paid out of my own pocket for the physical examinations and worked a whole week for free. I was desperate, at least, to see some returns on my sacrifices.

Gao reached out, on one of those days, because he'd heard that I was having problems. He told me I simply shouldn't bother with onboarding. He had to go to his hometown for a while, he wasn't sure for how long, and he couldn't take more than three consecutive days' leave. He wanted to know if I would use his employee number and fill in for him in the meantime, and he would reimburse me directly. I could also stay on when he returned, if I liked. He could take on two more neighborhoods and let me make the deliveries, both of us under his employee number.

I turned down such a dishonest proposal, of course. There were people at his depot who did work like this, but they had a trike, and I didn't. He hadn't been able to hold on to the spare one he had borrowed. Basically, he hadn't fully thought it through.

On the afternoon of April 8, after the Qingming Festival, I went back to the second-floor office of the Yunjing depot. Like previously, Director L and the two assistants returned from their lunch at three. I was the only person there for processing today. The finance clerk explained again that there were no more openings, so if I still wanted to onboard, I would have to swap quotas. This meant waiting another day. Faced with her impatient, flinty expression, I didn't dare ask what the different quotas meant. I later learned that she was referring to the spaces for official employees being full, so while I could register as a contract worker for the time being, I had to wait for a space to open up to go on the regular payroll.

Contract workers had no base salary or benefits, and the company didn't provide them with insurance. In most cases, they were only responsible for delivering parcels, and didn't do collections. For each delivery they earned a 2.2-yuan commission, while employees received only 1.6 yuan, but this was on top of a base salary and benefits. There was also an extra 0.2-yuan fee for every couple pounds that a parcel weighed over the initial two. Certain special circumstances, like cash on delivery purchases made through teleshopping channels, also accrued additional commission.

Since the original registration form was now invalid, I went in search of Manager Z again the following morning. When I arrived at Linhe depot, someone told me he had gone to Yunjing for some business and would be back around noon. Wasting time sitting around waiting didn't appeal, so I hurried over to catch him. I found Director L's office door locked, and the floor apparently empty. One of the warehouse workers downstairs told me that L didn't usually turn up at the office so early. There being nothing more I could do, I went home to distract myself for a while, before heading right back at eleven o'clock and, this time, bumping into Z.

"What are you doing here?" he said. "Go wait for me in Linhe."

If you hadn't messed me around for the past two weeks, do you think I would be pestering you so much, I wanted to scream.

I finally got my hands on the onboarding form for contract workers from Z that afternoon. The assistant wasn't in again, but I was used to this by now and would avoid seeing her if I could, anyway. I traveled the two hours to HQ and the staff there, at last, onboarded me.

While they processed my registration, there was an overweight fellow ahead of me in the line, who was back after leaving the job once before. He must have weighed more than two hundred pounds. The office staff looked at his physical exam report and immediately pointed out that his blood fat levels were high.

Frowning, one of the employees asked him,

“Did you leave to go and get fat?”

Everyone around us laughed. The man’s face flushed red, as he struggled to think of a response.

“Get a friend to do the test for you,” someone else in the line recommended. The office employee, who was well within ear shot, didn’t even blink an eye.