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Chinese Graduates in the UK Turn to Gig Economy Amidst Employment Challenges

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Faced with a tightening job market and visa restrictions, a growing number of Chinese graduates in the UK are turning to gig work and small-scale entrepreneurship as a means of survival. Mark Lin, a fine arts graduate from a prestigious London university, found himself struggling to secure employment after graduating in 2020. With traditional job opportunities out of reach, Lin began offering errand services to Chinese expats ranging from airport pickups to furniture assembly. What began as a stopgap measure soon evolved into a lucrative business, earning him up to £8,000 per month.

This informal economy has flourished among Chinese graduates navigating the UK's limited post-study opportunities. Many utilize Chinese-language platforms such as RedNote to

advertise services like home-cooked meals, beauty treatments, and administrative assistance often at rates significantly lower than market norms. These offerings cater to a niche community, creating demand and providing a financial cushion in a challenging economic climate.

Emily Zhang, a 24-year-old drama graduate, discovered a niche by offering mobile hairdressing services tailored for Asian hair types. Charging just a fraction of London salon rates, Zhang built a loyal clientele and now earns between £2,000 and £2,500 monthly. “This income allows me to stay afloat,” she explains. “It’s more reliable than the entry-level jobs available to me.”

Others are turning to entrepreneurship as a more permanent solution. Mirenuer Yibulayin, a Uyghur graduate from the University of Warwick, left her office job to open a bubble tea shop in East London. By leveraging community platforms and targeting the Chinese student market, her business not only achieved profitability but also enabled her to switch to a self-employed skilled worker visa. “Starting my own business gave me both income and the opportunity to remain in the UK legally,” she says.

However, the path forward is becoming increasingly constrained. In May, the UK government announced plans to reduce the post-study work visa duration from two years to 18 months, placing additional pressure on recent graduates to secure employment or alternative visa options. For individuals like Eddie Wang, an education graduate turned freelance photographer, the lack of structured career support and limited internship access during studies have made long-term career planning difficult.

These stories reflect a broader shift in how international graduates are adapting to a tough UK job market. While many entered with aspirations of conventional careers, they are now demonstrating adaptability and resilience transforming informal services into viable enterprises amid uncertain times.