A qualitative study of the factors affecting the work-life balance of employees in China

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Abstract

Purpose: To analyze the current work-life balance problems and the factors affecting employees in China. To determine the importance of human resource management, effective work-life balance management methods should be introduced to solve the work-life balance problem of employees in China. To explore the factors affecting the work-life balance (WLB) of Chinese employees, to propose practical solutions for resolving work-life conflicts (WLC) and improve employees' job satisfaction in China.

Design/methodology/approach: This study will use a qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with a variety of social groups to provide a more comprehensive picture.

Findings: This project confirmed that Chinese employees, including managers and leaders in Chinese companies, accept that the work-life conflict is an inevitable part of their professional lives. Several factors affect the work-life balance of Chinese employees, including gender discrimination in work and life, extended working hours, family commitments, and human resources interventions within the organization.

Research limitations/implications: In this study, the work domain is emphasized more than family commitments. Due to the centrality of work in Chinese culture and the prevalence of long working hours and intensified work practices, this makes sense. It is also limited since the sample size is relatively small, and convenient participants were chosen. Considering that the respondents hail from economically affluent provinces, they face fierce competition, which results in significant stress at work. Therefore, their work-life conflicts are significantly higher than those in economically less developed areas.

Practical implications: The study offers valuable insight into improving work-life balance for Chinese employees, particularly women. Managers must be aware of the factors that influence creating supportive work environments in China for training programs within their organizations to be effective. To reduce the parenting difficulty faced by working women, consider intergenerational care methods. Families need strategies to improve workers' work-life balance, especially women in professional careers.

Originality/value: It is recommended that future research investigate work-life balance issues within organizations based in diverse economic areas and within professional teams in corporations. A multidisciplinary team of researchers from different universities could conduct large-scale studies employing mixed methods to obtain more accurate work-life balance results and identify organizational and governmental intervention opportunities.

Introduction

Nowadays, technology moves at a fast pace and rapid communication and production processes, professionals face intense workloads (Office (ILO), 2006). In addition to increased work duties, the stress associated with maintaining employment can also result in illness and stress at home (Dodanwala et al., 2023). Consequently, there is an increasing concern in developing countries that increased employment may result in fewer caregivers for dependents, who may suffer significantly (Nadash et al., 2023). Also, as a result of China's rapid economic development, many people are willing to put in hard work to achieve a better life. As a developing country, China may face significant WLB challenges. The purpose of this study is to analyze the current work-life balance problems and the factors affecting employees in China. To determine the importance of human resource management, effective work-life balance management methods should be introduced to solve the work-life balance problem of employees in China. To explore the factors affecting the work-life balance (WLB) of Chinese employees, to propose practical solutions for resolving work-life conflicts (WLC) and improve employees' job satisfaction in China.

Literature Review

Gender and Careers

Recently, gender studies have shifted from focusing on gender differences to examining gender-related social structures, communication, and institutions (Risman & Davis, 2013). The notion of gender, however, is deeply rooted in society (Risman & Davis, 2013), and it is not static.

Generally, feminist accounts of gender and work date back to the 1970s and 1980s (Jackson & Jones, 1998). Cohen and Jeffrey's research published in 2009 suggests that family and labor market structures are primarily responsible for women's unequal and disadvantaged positions. Additionally, as civilization develops, increasing numbers of people are thinking about categorizing individuals based on race, culture, sexual orientation, and personality, particularly for women (Lips, 2016). Nearly half of employees were female in 2010, according to China Statistical Yearbook (2021). This may indicate that women have begun to shift their roles as structural determinants of their subordination. These kinds of changes may lead people to see identity as complex and multidimensional, adding to the message of this paper (McCall, 2005).

The Female Employment Context in China

Family needs have drive women's employment since manual labour was replaced by machinery in the 1760s (Cooke, 2007). The mechanized production process now allows unskilled workers to do the original work. Consequently, if only men cannot afford to support a family, women give up domestic duties to support their families. In succession, Chinese professional women entered history.

According to the China Statistical Yearbook (2021), over 58% of China's full-time employees are women, one of the highest levels globally. This is the same for most other developing countries. Women can perform any job if they are willing to do their duties to earn money to support their families, contributing to the nation's economic development (Chun, 2010).

In the recent context of female employment in China, due to the rapid rise of dual-career families in China (Gong et al., 2020), female workers perform better in the workplace. In L. Duxbury et al. (1994), gender plays a role in explaining work-related problems, their

appearance, and the ability to handle and resolve them. Keeping work and family responsibilities balanced has been a challenge for Chinese women. According to Cooke, Zou, and Bian (2001), it was believed that Chinese traditions and appreciation heavily influence Chinese women's social status. Moreover, Chinese tradition emphasizes the role of women in caring for children and doing household chores (Hu, 2015).

Consequently, women frequently expected to do housework and raise children may struggle to develop professionally. As a result, it can be hard to balance being a "perfect wife and mother" and working hard simultaneously. Furthermore, Chinese males are pressured to work hard to support their families (Adisa et al., 2014).

The low employability rates of women for government and managerial positions (Cooke, 2011) indicate that discrimination still occurs against them. Despite this, there is a greater likelihood of women than men to be positive about their work (Selvarajan et al., 2015). According to the New York Times, an increasing number of Chinese women are holding higher positions.

In other words, women believe they can perform top jobs equally well as their male counterparts, giving them a professional advantage. Chinese female employees may be pressured to perform better than male employees. However, this may negatively affect work and life balance (Liu et al., 2021). Next, the paper will address work-life balance issues in greater detail, especially those related to Chinese female employees.

The Political, Economic, and Social Case for Work-Life Balance

Xu (2019) argues that it is impossible to perform work-related roles while prioritizing life-related duties in China due to the combined and growing needs of work and non-work responsibilities. Due to demographic shifts (such as an ageing population and a decreasing labour force) and work intensification caused by increasing competition, WLB issues may become prominent in developing countries (Abdoolla, 2015). Notably, the increasing number of female employees caring for the elderly and children in China has sparked numerous WLC discussions and influenced relevant policy developments.

As a result, governments have begun to recognize that work-life demands and cultural changes are at odds. As Pocock asserts (2005, p. 198), 'the case for work-life balance is becoming increasingly evident in countries that rely increasingly on the paid contributions of workers with dependents. A government policy aimed at improving the conditions of employment and family interests is promoted by addressing the issue of the Women's Federation. A series of human resources (HR) actions were also introduced in response to the policy objectives (Marchington et al., 2016). The notion that organizations provide the most quality employment is controversial, in addition to improving employees' and their family's quality of life, financial rewards and mental health should also be considered. (Deci et al., 2017; Gayathiri et al., 2013). Nevertheless, there has been considerable criticism of the WLB discourse and its associated inconsistency in Europe and North America's political and economic contexts (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018). Research on the advantages of WLB strategies has produced a variety of results. There has been evidence that family-oriented rules and regulations can benefit individuals, families, organizations, and society (Kim et al., 2023). WLB has been demonstrated to increase employee satisfaction, reduce stress, and reduce the likelihood of leaving organizations (Omar et al., 2020). This is worth learning from by China's human resources management (Cookie, 2017).

In contrast, according to other opinions, HR practices, such as involuntary overtime, influence employees' perceptions of WLB's organizational support (Berg et al., 2003). Further, long hours' effect is influenced by "cultural significance of work" (Skinner & Pocock, 2008). It is evident that a country's organizational, legislative, and cultural factors determine the success of the WLB policy at a given point in time (Chandra, 2012).

Additionally, according to Mehdi (2019), the outcome of work-life on employees and organizations may be optimistic in the best case scenario but pessimistic in the worst case. Organizing WLB practices is primarily motivated by worker shortages and economic pressures rather than employee benefits. Moreover, negatively impacted workers may experience stress, take time off work, or even leave, which may result in the organization as well as society losing fertility (Brough et al., 2008).

The Context of Work-Life Balance in China
As mentioned in the section on "Gender and Career" 38% of Chinese full-time staff have an extremely high rate of working participation throughout their careers due to socialist systems (Cooke, 2007). The presence of women in production, service industries, education, social welfare, and health is evident in every sector of society today. The majority of female employees work full-time since other options do not exist. Compared to other countries, China does not practice part-time, job sharing, or flexible hours. Working mothers use nurseries, private care facilities, and family organizations for childcare. However, because of one-child restrictions and the age of retirement, some young working parents are able to depend on older generations for childcare (Cook & Dong, 2011). Previously, research on Chinese women's employment models has shown that employees with children can work casually or in lower-demand positions to meet their responsibilities (Kelly et al., 2014; Yi & Chien, 2002).

According to the "Global Gender Gap Report" released by the World Economic Forum in 2022, 68.2% of China's gender gap has been eliminated. However, unpaid housework still consumes 2.5 times as much time for Chinese women as it does for men. As of 2021, China's female employment participation rate is 61.6%, while the male employment rate is 74.3%. This still shows a significant gender gap. In addition, only 1.6% of unemployed women over the age of 37 possess a college degree according to the China Women's Employment Situation Survey Report published in 2023. Therefore, there is a high demand for permanent full-time jobs in society for both sexes due to inadequate social welfare provisions available to the unemployed and disadvantaged. Accordingly, Chinese authorities prioritize employment creation at the expense of its quality in order to respond to these challenges. Therefore, legislative and administrative policies addressing employment quality, including WLB, are not well supported and enforced within the organization. In spite of the fact that it has become a practice in China to increase the working hours of both the casual and private sector.

Further, the "Regulations of the State Council on Employees' Working Hours" stipulate that employees may work no more than eight hours a day and forty hours a week, respectively. Chinese managers require their subordinates to be ready to work whenever the business calls for it, so the actual number is likely to be much higher, as organizational leaders may work even more than 47 hours per week. Thus, in state public organizations, employees are often required to work overtime at unusual times, such as evenings, to meet urgent requests from superiors. As a result, private sector managers are generally more likely to use performance-related pay or bonuses as part of their performance reward strategies, resulting in more intensive work for many employees.

According to Leon (2018), both the position held and income are proportional to WLB. Individuals with high incomes experience work-related stress that negatively impacts their personal lives. The majority of those holding lower positions are less capable of commercializing their household chores and family responsibilities, and therefore experience more difficulties balancing work and life.

It is true that Chinese female professionals work fewer hours than men, but they can still be affected by WLB because they are more likely to be caring for their families, children and the elderly. WLB can be influenced by the rate of pay as well. According to Wu, Feng, Fan (2003),

and Xiao (2012), women who earn between 40 and 60% of their family's income face more problems than working-life balance issues. As a result, lower-income women prioritize their families, whereas those with higher incomes prioritize their careers. Based on findings from Xiao and Cookie (2012), only women with incomes between 40-60% of their monthly income feel they have no clear role to play and need help to balance work and life.

It is worth noting that Chinese workers, whether male or female, cannot determine what job they do, how much time they work, or even where they work. Their employers make these decisions according to business needs. Furthermore, employees are willing to take advantage of any available work opportunities to secure their families financially, regardless of location or time.

Although women in China enjoy a high education level, their culture causes them to place family and personal life above career subconsciously (Cook & Dong, 2011). As a tradition in Chinese society, men are expected to handle external life challenges, while women are expected to handle internal household chores (Schneider, 2011). Because of the one-child policy adopted by the Chinese government in the 1980s, many parents believe only children are more valuable than previous generations of children. This leads to intense competition between parents, mainly middle-class parents, in raising their children. Educating children begins well before their formal schooling age. Consequently, even if mothers can afford childcare, their energy must be directed towards raising their only child rather than focusing on their careers. This also impacts their work-life balance.

Hypothesis Development

Since this qualitative study is exploratory and explanatory, as opposed to many quantitative studies that start with a well-defined hypothesis, it will aim to explore the significance of this study by examining participants' experiences. Despite the absence of a hypothesis, the validity and rigour of a research study remain intact. It is essential to consider the relevance of the research question and the conclusions drawn (Marks & Yardley, 2004, pp. 56–68).

Methods

Research Methods and Background Information

In this study, 20 Chinese workers were interviewed. Interviews are a common method of collecting qualitative data, so it was chosen as the research method. In addition to revealing people's meanings and perceptions, interviews also provide detailed information about 'the precise particularities of such matters as people's understandings and interactions' (Silverman, 2005). By conducting in-depth interviews, the researcher can get a detailed account of the participants' experiences in the social world, and ensure the participants' opinions are accurate. (Pacho, 2015) These qualitative data are considered highly authentic and valid. We needed to describe in detail the many aspects considered of the Chinese employees' jobs and life to gain a deeper understanding of their 'richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity' (Oliver et al., 2005). The workers' lives became more complex and detailed through qualitative interviews, which would not have been apparent through quantitative methods.

In addition, semi-structured interviews can be more relaxed than structured or non-structured interviews. It was hoped that by creating a situation that resembled an in-depth but casual conversation, a more relaxed atmosphere would be created, and the respondents would feel more comfortable sharing more information about their life and work. For this project, maintaining a positive relationship with these workers was crucial. Also, good rapport was crucial to reducing power differences and gathering accurate data. The researcher will be able

to interact with informants through semistructured interviews, answering any questions they might have and discussing experiences.

Research Design

Below is a detailed overview of the interviews that took place over a period of three months via Internet calls and face-to-face. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 20 Chinese workers. Participants included four senior managers, four middle managers, eight full-time employees, and four part-timers. A total of six organizations in China were interviewed in this study, including those in Guangdong, Shandong, and Beijing Municipalities. This method has proven crucial when collecting business and management data in China because gaining access to organizations and cooperating with participants has been challenging (Chen & Tjosvold, 2006; Tsui et al., 2006). As well, that could also cause problems with the results and be a point of contention.

We interviewed Chinese employees between the ages of 20 and 50, four of whom were single and the rest were married, to get a better understanding of work-life balance. The younger single interviewees had worked at least two years. Married respondents had worked for more than three years. Among the respondents, six worked for private-owned enterprises (POEs), five were employed by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), five were employed by the public sector, and four were employed by foreign-owned enterprises. Organizations ranging from medium to large were represented.

Precisely, these organizations include one public sector, namely the Development and Reform Commission, with fewer than 100 employees; one POE, namely Caferica Company, employing 100 to 250 people; one SOE, Bank of China, which employs 251 to 500 people; one school, called Dezhou Senior High Middle School in north of China, employs 501 to 800 people; and one POE, namely Huawei which branch has employed between 801 and 1500 employees; and another organization, called Chinese Public Hospital, employed more than 1500 people. As shown in Table 1, the sample included catering, government, finance, education, IT/telecom, and the medical sector (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic data of the interviewees

Code	Occupation	Tenure	Age	Gender	Number of children	Family status	Annual income (MYR)
F. 1	Mid-ranking manager	7	30	Female	1	Married	180, 000
F. 2	Senior manager	20	42	Female	1	Married	250, 000
F. 3	Secretary	2	24	Female	0	Single	11, 000
F. 4	Doctor	1	27	Female	0	Single	80, 000
F. 5	Teacher	10	40	Female	1	Married	60, 000
F. 6	Officer	8	31	Female	1	Married	65, 000
F. 7	Officer	5	27	Female	0	Married	50, 000
F. 8	Government official	5	30	Female	0	Single	28, 000
F. 9	Auditors	14	49	Female	3	Married	850, 000

F. 10	Part-timer/Self-employment	10	50	Female	2	Married	Instability
F. 11	Part-timer/Self-employment	12	49	Female	1	Married	Instability
M. 1	Mid-ranking manager	12	37	Male	1	Married	200, 000
M. 2	Mid-ranking manager	16	38	Male	1	Married	210, 000
M. 3	Senior manager	4	42	Male	1	Married	26, 000
M. 4	Senior manager	4	42	Male	1	Married	27, 000
M. 5	Doctor	3	27	Male	0	Single	80, 000
M. 6	Editor of internet	7	33	Male	1	Married	12, 000
M. 7	Technical engineer	8	32	Male	1	Married	29, 000
M. 8	Part-timer/Self-employment	27	50	Male	2	Married	Instability
M. 9	Part-timer/Self-employment	26	49	Male	1	Married	Instability

Note: The code for the interviewees was based on their gender. Female interviewees were coded F. 1 to F. 11 and Male interviewees were coded M. 1 to M. 9; Tenure were related on the number of years that they worked for.

Ethical Considerations
Interviews were conducted in Chinese, and each interview lasted at least half an hour. Participants were asked to participate in the interview, but it was clear that participation was voluntary and that they would remain anonymous. Additionally, a questionnaire guides the researcher in asking and recording questions and taking notes. The data collected was analyzed, checked, and stored. Miles and Huberman (1994) also explained and addressed discrepancies in answers by asking respondents for additional information. The study required two respondents for additional information to ensure data accuracy. Therefore, ten follow-up online interviews were conducted in 2023 for verification.

Finding, Analysis and Discussion
It was prepared a questionnaire with ten open-ended and closed-ended questions aimed at interviewees, including the following questions:
(1) Why did you choose this profession?
(2) Have you encountered any challenges due to your gender while pursuing your career?
How does your skill set compare to that of your male colleagues (The question posed to females)?
(3) How did your environment respond to your promotion to a leadership position?
(5) Have you observed any issues related to WLB in your workplace?
(6) If the answer to the previous question is "yes", what are the reasons you and your colleagues have encountered WLB issues?
(7) How does HR recognize and respond to WLC, if any, within the employing organization?
(8) In order to achieve work-life balance, what would you do?
(9) What is your advice for females who have families who would like to succeed in a leadership position?

(10) How well do you balance work and home life? If you could focus only on one of the two, which would you choose?

The research results' relationship to these questions will be reported and analyzed here. Through interviews and data analysis, the researchers will identify factors affecting employees' work-life balance in China from four perspectives.

Gender Discrimination in Work and Life

A glass ceiling refers to the situation in which women do not achieve high leadership success despite a rise in female professions previously dominated by men. In addition to poor career advice and counselling provided by relevant authorities, the glass ceiling effect may prevent females from reaching higher levels of professional success (Lyness & Thompson, 1997). Nevertheless, these obstacles are intangible and do not seem as prevalent as they appear. As a result, the glass ceiling effect can be regarded as an invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching higher positions in organizations (Jauhar & Lau, 2018). Moreover, women experienced difficulties maintaining a work-life balance as they were responsible for their children (Lakshmi & Prasanth, 2018; Naseem et al., 2020).

Moreover, the analysis of the questionnaire indicates that meeting family or career interests motivated people to pursue careers. According to two respondents, promotion to a managerial position was attributed to support from their managers or colleagues. Four women were driven by the desire to compete with their male colleagues, one of whom stated:

"It is a dual-career family for me, my husband is a business owner facing intense competition in the workplace. He also encouraged me to compete for higher jobs and higher salaries, but it is not easy for women to attain higher positions, Sexual harassment is a problem that even my colleagues around me have to endure."
(F.1)

The fierce competition female employees face to achieve higher positions can be seen in a reflection such as this (Shambaugh, 2008). However, none of these 4 female respondents indicated that they had climbed higher up the career ladder at the beginning of their careers. Training and their performance and performance appraisal reinforced such ambition. During the interviews, it was also emphasized that female workers should receive equal treatment in the workplace during their professional development.

However, according to nine women, the gender barrier hindered their career opportunities due to a lack of equal opportunities. They claimed their gender had limited their chances of being considered for management positions, and another admitted being sexually abused at her workplace,

"I am the secretary to my manager, even if he has a wife and child, my manager always wants an affair with me. I did not explicitly refuse his unreasonable request because I fear losing my job and need to support my parents."
(F. 3)

Further, 5 female respondents said their skills were as strong as men's, and they were appreciated by an environment in which women were given equal opportunities to succeed in their careers and were encouraged to succeed (Epstein, 2022). Despite this, the remaining seven women reported that they had not encountered such a positive working environment, with one representative stating,

"It is my belief that men are self-centred, power-driven, and self-assured compared to women. The level of my education degree certificate is higher than that of my male colleagues in my team, and my performance is also higher. My head still assigns me some work I'm not responsible for."
(F. 5)

Despite some arguing that it is culturally connected to gender equality derived from and deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese culture, daily reality demonstrates that it is the male professional who determines the fate of his wives as homemakers. A female employee said in the interview,

"My family doesn't support me in competing for high positions, even advising me to quit my job since they believe such positions are impossible for women Due to this, they believe it is best to prepare for pregnancy and take care of children more than anything else, and I feel helpless."

(F. 6)

As a result, this study supports Cooke's (2005) claim that female employees in China are discriminated against despite the high number of female employees. As previously demonstrated (Ren & Caudle, 2020), Chinese female employees have difficulty reaching top positions but still struggle to earn enough income to support their families.

Working Hours

Analyzing employee working hours and identifying issues that threaten their professional and personal lives is important. The number of working hours varied significantly between departments (Table 2). Employees in the IT division work an average of more than 40 hours a week.

Table 2: Working hours per week of the type of organizations researched

Working hours per week	IT/Media sector	Medical industry	Education industry	Government sector	Financing institution	Part-time /Self-employment
20-30 hours				✓	✓	
30-40 hours	✓					
40-50 hours						
50-60 hours		✓				
Over 60 hours			✓			
Uncertain						✓

In the media department, two male contract employers worked only thirty hours a week due to a lack of commissions resulting from a short term of employment. Despite this, the employee regarded his contract work positively, as it was autonomous. Moreover, there was another male employee who could not work more than 20hours to 25 hours a week due to health problems. Despite this, his colleagues confirm that he remains committed to and preoccupied with his work after hours. Working hours were reduced in both cases unintentionally as a result of external agreements, such as contract IT employees working four days a week. One respondent highly regarded this segmentation as distinguishing work and home for these individuals.

Despite not agreeing that working long hours must be associated with heavy workloads, some respondents could not meet their family commitments. This is because they were not at home

four days a week. As a result of such circumstances, one of them assigned additional responsibility to his wife, who was responsible for his children and household.

"I was exhausted after working more than 30 hours a week, so I was unable to help her housework or play with my toddler when I finished. Our feelings are very guilty and stressed, and she even filed for divorce. As a result, we have been under a lot of stress at work and at home."

(M. 3)

Separating work from private time and maintaining a work-life balance had a variety of consequences. The IT industry has employees who spend their weekends engaged in non-work activities, while the media sector has employees engaged in work-related activities, which indicates a lack of differentiation. Even though it was agreed that weekends were necessary for self-employment, it is evident from the interviews that these decisions were uninformed. Therefore, some employees confirmed that they were compelled to continue working on weekends:

"Generally, contract employees must produce something regardless of the time limit, at all costs. If you're not willing to accept this (...), you're going to have trouble."

(M. 6)

"As a self-employed person, you have no alternatives. You keep working on Saturday and Sunday without realizing you'll miss the last flight home. This impacts your family life adversely."

(M. 8)

"To succeed as a self-employed individual, you must be able and ready to work every day, including weekends."

The study results are less surprising. Those employees who normally do not work at weekends are perceived as having an effective work-family balance, which is in contrast to those who engage in weekend work.

(M. 9)

Family Care Commitments

No matter their marital status, females fill career gaps and meet emotional and professional needs (Kossek & Lambert, 2004). But long-term family planning can delay or even prevent professional success if pursued. Chinese traditions suggest that male partners contribute less to household duties when both spouses work.

According to the findings (Nemţeanu & Dabija, 2023), work and personal life are clashing in many ways, as a result of demographic characteristics. Children with children are expected to work less because of the one-child policy, but childcare and elderly care are unequally distributed. The likelihood of women suffering from WLC is thus higher than the likelihood of the opposite gender (Elinsky, 2020; Ollier-Malaterre, 2016). However, those who are career-oriented may have a different perspective on their WLC, in which their professional life is taken up completely, which prevents them from finding partners. They may also be afraid of risking their careers to raise children, which deters them from starting a family.

"In spite of my 30 years old age, I remain single because I prefer to have my own space to relax after a long day at work, or meet with my friends after work to socialize."

(F. 7)

"I am always assigned long- or short-term business trips as a single woman by my manager because he believes single women have more flexibility in their schedules, which leaves me unable to consider blind dating or marriage. I am extremely troubled by my parents' constant quarreling."

(F. 2)

There are some firms where the majority of employees are males and single females, but mothers with dependents are expected to attend business trips if their employers request them. Since over 50% of respondents were female, the WLC significantly stressed them out. According to one of the respondents, Mr. Zhong, head of the audit department, over thirty audit staff members have children. In addition to numerous business trips, this presents a significant difficulty for young mothers. However, since some interviewees are civil service employees performing highly coveted positions, they rarely resign and are satisfied with the status quo. The following is how one female auditor describes in terms of work-life balance,

"(...) I find this arrangement to be suitable for me considering I can send my children to nursery while working at the same time. After I finish my work, I can devote my time to my children, and later I can continue working after my children have gone to sleep."
(F. 8)

There is a risk of being trapped in a vicious circle when women are required to work constantly, as they do not have time to find partners and start families. In addition, married women may have to delay motherhood to maintain their careers (Mason & Ekman, 2007; Xiao & Cooke, 2012b). All of these factors should be considered when addressing work-life balance.

HR Interventions within organizations

Based on the above evidence, it becomes evident that China's work-life issues are caused by a variety of sources, one of which is the different human resource initiatives. According to the informants, 5 organizations are experiencing WLC issues, while four organizations have taken various measures to address them. Measures included financial and non-financial rewards, adjusting work hours, teaching morals, and providing spiritual support (China Statistical Yearbook, 2021). As a result, financial rewards (such as overtime pay, bonuses, and other material rewards) were cited by many manager informants as the most common way to "compensate employees for their time" or "reward employees for their contributions". However, To achieve an organization's goals, SOEs and POEs tend to reinforce both financial and non-financial methods by instilling moral values that force employees to compromise. It is a result of Chinese paternalism, which imposes a great deal of dedication on the organization, and employers are expected to take care of them.

Six respondents said their organization had hired counselors to resolve stress. Multinational corporations as well as successful private companies have implemented Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to alleviate employee stress. Chinese paternalist culture has long included work-life balance issues as part of workplace welfare programs for SOEs and, to a lesser extent, for private companies. Nevertheless, EAPs are still in their infancy in China and are primarily available to managers and professionals. One manager said:

"HR practices must focus pragmatically on relevant problems to achieve effective outcomes. If WLB issues are not systematically analyzed, effective solutions may not be developed. When dealing with WLC problems, HR may not be able to provide effective solutions, resulting in anxiety."
(M. 1)

"The most effective motivation methods will probably be financial rewards and material incentives. However, to balance work and family life, I would like advice from a counsellor, or maybe more flexible hours are available."
(F. 8)

According to interviewees of six companies that have taken steps to reduce employee WLC, only four achieved positive outcomes. Two organizations reported an 'average' outcome, while three reported partial relief or some effects; however, the remaining respondents believed the outcome was 'poor'. There was a difference in how respondents perceived a positive outcome.

As an example, a private organization gave its employees one rest day a week. In response to this issue, the organization developed a policy that allows employees to request leave under exceptional circumstances. According to a manager, the policy led to a positive outcome because employees could apply for leave in a controlled manner. Nevertheless, certain HR interventions may even adversely affect employees' work-life satisfaction by causing them to abuse the opportunity by applying too frequently. As managerial staff faced high workloads, promoted employees might have demonstrated their capability by performing better.

A limited number of managers indicated that line managers should provide their subordinates with deeper support and understanding, as emotional intelligence is still under-appreciated in Chinese leadership, as well as effective practices aimed at minimizing employees' work-life balance (Hosain & Hossain, 2019; Reis, 2015). Moreover, according to the research data, managers fail to pay attention to work-life balance issues, even though they face significant work-life balance problems. Conflict must be resolved regardless of the family's cost. Work is important for both organizations and individuals. The number of candidates willing to take on jobs increases when employees are dissatisfied with their work-life balance. An attitude like this will increase stress and anxiety.

Accordingly, managers' views of employee work-life balance differ from employee expectations of the types of support they wish to receive in the workplace. Xiao and Cooke (2012b) say 37% of knowledgeable employees believe that long working hours could adversely affect their work-life balance. According to Xiao and Cooke's (2012) research, 31% of knowledge workers who have experienced negative experiences related to work-life balance expect help with childcare or elderly care. Furthermore, all female employees who have children would appreciate more time to care for them. Despite this, the interviewees in management positions disapproved of implementing formal HR policies concerning flexible working arrangements. They prefer to deal with employees' requests on a one-to-one basis rather than institutionalizing the arrangement, as some employees can abuse it. Based on these findings and those of other researchers, such as Demerouti et al. (2014), overworking negatively impacts family life more than the reverse (Demerouti et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Our study examines the factors that may influence a worker's work-life balance in China, based on the experiences of managers and the majority of employees. This study also indicated that managers within Chinese companies, as well as the majority of their employees, seem to be aware of the fact that work-life problems are an unavoidable part of their professional careers. Despite this, they are unaware of this significant issue, which the companies should address. To deal with this problem, every individual adopts a variety of different and unique methods. Although the ease of adopting human resource management methods for companies and organizations, managers pay more attention to the company's interests than the needs of women and men to avoid the negative influence that heavy workloads and overtime work can have. Consequently, managers usually fail to adopt policies that accommodate employees' family requirements.

Organizations and companies are developing various human resources initiatives to enhance employees' work-life balance. Additionally, it is beneficial to provide a family-friendly working environment and bonding opportunities for employees within a company. In addition, organizations and companies tend to reduce hostile atmospheres by utilizing financial and material rewards. This is one of the main methods of reducing the conflict between work and life. In this case, professionals seek a better quality of life and more living resources, such as money, since the Chinese economy is still developing. For decades, traditional culture has been characterized by its collectivism and paternalism, maintaining social harmony and stability.

Generally, Chinese employers reward overtime, provide welfare, and provide entertainment for employees to maintain healthy work relationships (Cooke, 2013; Cooke et al., 2019; Cooke & Jing, 2009; Spector et al., 2017).

This study found that managerial and professional representatives work 60 hours per week, primarily in the private sector and the service industry. According to Skinner and Pocock (2008), long hours can be distorted and different depending on culture, industry, and organizational context, so prioritizing real working time over desired working hours is imperative. It is evident that working long hours in Chinese companies implies overtime and the absence of regular rest days. Consequently, workers experience burnout, stress, and exhaustion, resulting in productivity decreases. Flexibility in rest days and work-life balance should be promoted by companies to improve working conditions.

As shown by research evidence (Mak et al., 2014), increasing competitiveness and stress negatively affect individuals and societies (Mak et al., 2014). As a result, this research has implications for Chinese regulations, dogmatics, cultural values, and societal values. If social policies and effective enforcement of working standards are not adequately supported, and without a cultural shift encouraging a more positive life-work balance that facilitates well-being for individuals, families, and society, it is unreasonable to expect organizations to implement life-work balance policies voluntarily (Clutterbuck, 2003b; Zheng et al., 2015). Nevertheless, these regulations may be rejected by individuals determined to maintain their financial security by maintaining their jobs.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of the findings are that future studies should offer a theoretical framework for integrating diverse aspects of work and life. To accomplish this, positive HR practices must be operationalized. Indeed, Chinese work-life balance research can benefit from theory building rather than theory application (Ali et al., 2022). As a result, this study will contribute to future theories and research on work-life interaction. The qualitative nature of my study enables it to examine work and life from a wide range of perspectives. It involves the cross-comparison of a wide range of workplaces. Moreover, it is possible to examine how the employment of women from third-world countries as domestic help reinforces gendered roles as well as racial and class inequalities.

Moreover, multinationals operating in China may benefit from this study. Since western cultures tend to be individualistic, work-life balance emphasizes ensuring employees are given adequate time to care for their families. In the recommendation section, studies in the future could explain how Chinese companies typically involve their families in company-sponsored activities to promote work-life balance. Due to motivating and demotivating situations, Chinese workers' work-life balance becomes more of a trade-off. Kirby's study deals with diverse societal contexts following this finding. Therefore, it is critical that Chinese and foreign business partners are made aware of such differences to formulate relevant and practical solutions to work-life conflict-related issues that may arise (Kirby et al., 2013).

Practical and Social Implications

It offers valuable insight into improving the WLB of Chinese employees. Overworking is still common in China, and this study offers valuable insight into improving the WLB of Chinese employees, specifically women. Cooke (2022) says that working after regular office hours is a significant problem for Chinese employees due to demographic changes and marketization. Further, a lack of support from their organizations can also affect their WLB. Therefore, employees maintain a healthy work-life balance in a supportive work environment. Supportive leaders can build a good relationship with subordinates and encourage them to treat one another

respectfully and dignifiedly. Managers, therefore, need to develop positive working relationships with their employees, recognize their development potential, and take care of their subordinates' lives (Zhao et al., 2019). Employees will be encouraged to make additional efforts in exchange for supervisors' trust and support. To ensure that training programs are successful, supervisors must understand how to create an environment that encourages learning. Women in a position to work-family conflict can better benefit from intergenerational care as intergenerational care not only improves labour supply for women with children (Du et al., 2018; Kang & Liu, 2022) but also increases female fertility rates. The supply and demand of formal childcare services in China (Yang et al., 2022) are severely in conflict. Therefore, Professional women are more likely to choose intergenerational care than formal childcare services. Firstly, more childcare services must be provided (Hu & Yuan, 2022). Furthermore, childcare services for children from 0 to 3 years of age are virtually nonexistent, and public kindergartens for children from 3 to 6 years of age are scarce (Hu & Yuan, 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Moreover, childcare services need to be more flexible in terms of schedule. Parents need help considering childcare facilities that end early and must be synchronized with their parents' working hours (Kang & Liu, 2022). Working mothers in China must also spend more time and energy on evening and weekend childcare, resulting in a burden on their household that cannot be effectively reduced (Li et al., 2020).

In addition, individuals differ in factors that affect work-life balance barriers and resources. Most employees can reduce their burden through family support. Employees can achieve more career success if they have access to high levels of support within their families. For this reason, the importance of developing strategies to improve employee Work-Life Balance, especially for professional women, cannot be overstated.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research
This study is primarily concerned with work-related issues rather than family commitments in the workplace. However, this is reasonable given the central importance of work in Chinese culture and the prevalence of long working hours and intensive work across the workforce. Furthermore, the sample size is relatively small, with convenient participants being selected as another limitation. In addition, respondents from economically prosperous provinces face fierce competition, which results in significant workplace stress. Thus, they experience more issues with work-life balance than those from less economically developed areas.

Consequently, it is critical to be cautious when generalizing this qualitative study's findings. Future studies could examine work-life balance issues within organizations located in diverse regions and comprised of various professions in light of this. Multidisciplinary research teams could be organized from universities nationwide to conduct larger-scale studies that would yield more accurate results regarding work-life situations and could develop potential interventions for organizations and governments using mixed methods.

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