



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC SCIENCES (IJEES)

WORK-LIFE BALANCE CHALLENGES IN CHINA: KEY DETERMINANTS FROM RECENT LITERATURE

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Received: 15 November 2025 • Accepted: 10 December 2025 • Published: 31 December 2025

Abstract

This article examines the key determinants contributing to work-life balance (WLB) challenges among employees in China by synthesizing peer-reviewed literature published between 2010 and 2025. Although WLB has been widely explored in Western contexts, limited research has addressed how it is experienced within China's unique combination of rapid economic growth, traditional cultural norms, and evolving labor practices. Using a qualitative library-based approach and thematic analysis, the study identifies structural pressures such as long working hours, weak enforcement of labor regulations, and high job demands as major contributors to persistent imbalance. These factors are reinforced by cultural expectations rooted in Confucian values, which encourage diligence, loyalty, and acceptance of overwork. Gendered social roles further intensify challenges, particularly for women who face disproportionate caregiving responsibilities alongside their professional duties. Organizational responses remain uneven and often symbolic, with flexible work arrangements inconsistently implemented and underutilized due to stigma and managerial attitudes. Although younger generations show growing resistance to excessive work cultures, systemic barriers continue to limit improvements. The findings highlight the need for integrated reforms addressing labor policy, organizational culture, and deeply embedded social norms. This review offers a contextualized understanding of WLB challenges in China and contributes insight for future research and policy development.

Keywords: work-life balance, China, organizational culture, structural determinants, gender roles, flexible work arrangements, work-family conflict

How to cite: Xinglong, Z., Nururly, S. (2025). Work-Life Balance Challenges in China: Key Determinants from Recent Literature. *International Journal of Education and Economic Sciences (IJEES)*, 1(4), 30-42.

1 Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) has emerged as a critical area of concern in contemporary organizational studies, particularly as global economic transformation reshapes the nature of work across both developed and developing economies. In China, the rapid pace of industrial expansion, technological integration, and labor market restructuring has intensified pressures on employees, creating conditions that make balancing work and personal life increasingly difficult. Scholars have highlighted that globalization and corporate competitiveness often lead to

escalating job demands, extended working hours, and heightened performance expectations (Roopavathi & Kishore, 2021). These structural pressures frequently encroach upon employees' personal well-being, contributing to stress, fatigue, and declining life satisfaction (Chimote & Srivastava, 2013).

Despite growing international attention to WLB, much of the empirical and theoretical work in this field has been centered in Western contexts, where policy frameworks and organizational cultures typically support structured work-life initiatives (Ansari et al., 2015). By contrast, China's socio-cultural environment, characterized by collectivist values, strong familial obligations, and a deeply entrenched work ethic, creates unique determinants of work-life imbalance that differ from those observed in Western settings (Xu, 2019). The coexistence of traditional expectations and modern economic demands places Chinese workers under competing pressures to fulfill both professional and domestic responsibilities.

Compounding these socio-cultural influences are demographic shifts, including population aging and a shrinking labor force, that have led to intensified workloads and increasing reliance on the existing workforce (Dodanwala et al., 2023). Furthermore, limited access to caregiving support, coupled with rising dependency ratios, exacerbates work-life strain for employees who are simultaneously responsible for providing economic stability and family care (Nadash et al., 2023). Such conditions underscore the need to examine the specific factors that shape WLB challenges within China's evolving labor landscape.

Although researchers have acknowledged these complexities, there remains a notable gap in consolidated, literature-driven analyses that identify the core determinants influencing WLB among Chinese employees. Existing studies are often fragmented, examining isolated themes rather than offering a comprehensive synthesis of the socioeconomic, organizational, and cultural forces that collectively shape employees' experiences. To address this gap, this article systematically reviews current scholarly literature to identify and analyze the key determinants underpinning work-life balance challenges in China. By mapping these influences, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of how structural, cultural, and demographic factors interact to shape employee well-being, while offering a contextualized foundation for developing culturally responsive work-life policies.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Work-Life Balance in China

Work-life balance (WLB) has gained increasing scholarly attention in China as the country undergoes rapid economic, cultural, and demographic transitions. Conceptually, WLB refers to the relationship between professional responsibilities and personal roles, framed by scholars either as a shared responsibility between organizations and employees (Barrera, 2007) or as an individual effort to distribute time and energy across life domains effectively (Kirchmeyer, 2000; Greenhaus et al., 2003). Theoretical perspectives, such as Spillover Theory, Border Theory, and Role Theory, offer additional insight into how work and non-work domains interact, emphasizing that balance is shaped by the flow of emotions and behaviors between roles, the permeability of boundaries, and the expectations attached to multiple social roles (Clark, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). These frameworks provide a foundation for understanding how WLB is conceptualized within different cultural and organizational settings, including China.

Within the Chinese context, work-life balance is increasingly discussed in relation to broader socioeconomic developments, such as industrial growth, shifting labor patterns, and evolving family structures. As noted by Xu (2019), Chinese employees today navigate complex intersections between professional expectations and domestic responsibilities, a dynamic influenced by the nation's demographic transformations and workforce restructuring. Scholars also observe that cultural norms continue to play a central role in shaping WLB discourse in China. Traditional values emphasize fulfilling obligations to both the workplace and the family, creating a societal

backdrop in which work and personal domains remain closely intertwined. This cultural dimension has prompted Chinese policymakers and social organizations to recognize WLB as an important area of concern, as reflected in initiatives led by institutions such as the Women's Federation, which promotes employment reforms while safeguarding family welfare.

In organizational studies, WLB in China is also linked with changing human resource management (HRM) practices. As HRM moves toward more employee-centered approaches, discussions increasingly highlight the need for workplaces to support not only job performance but also broader aspects of employee well-being, including personal fulfillment, family care, and mental health (Marchington et al., 2016; Deci et al., 2017). Research from Western contexts has influenced Chinese scholarship, illustrating the potential benefits of WLB initiatives, such as improved job satisfaction, reduced stress, and greater organizational commitment, although findings vary across cultural environments. Some studies emphasize the value of supportive policies, flexible arrangements, and family-oriented programs, while others note inconsistencies between policy design and on-the-ground application (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018; Omar et al., 2020). Such insights contribute to an expanding body of literature exploring how WLB is understood, promoted, and interpreted within Chinese workplaces.

Additionally, demographic trends shaping modern Chinese society, such as the growing number of dual-income families, rising caregiving responsibilities, and the nation's aging population, have further amplified scholarly interest in WLB. These shifts have broadened the discussion beyond employment conditions alone to consider how WLB relates to social expectations, household structures, and intergenerational care arrangements (Nadash et al., 2023). As a result, the concept of WLB in China is increasingly examined as both a workplace issue and a societal one, reflecting the interconnected nature of family life, cultural norms, and organizational practices.

Overall, the literature illustrates that work-life balance in China is approached as a multidimensional construct shaped by evolving cultural values, demographic realities, and organizational developments. While international scholarship provides important theoretical and empirical insights, Chinese studies contribute culturally grounded perspectives that emphasize the unique interplay between traditional family expectations, modern labor demands, and emerging HR practices. These discussions establish a foundation for examining WLB more deeply within the context of Chinese employees and for identifying how contemporary literature conceptualizes the factors that influence their work-life experiences.

3 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, library-based research design, relying entirely on secondary data rather than primary data collection. Following the approach outlined in the thesis, the analysis drew on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports published between **2010 and 2025**, enabling the integration of both foundational theories and recent developments in work-life balance (WLB) within the Chinese context. Relevant studies were identified through systematic searches in **Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar**, using combinations of keywords such as "*work-life balance in China*," "*work-family conflict*," "*organizational flexibility*," and "*gender roles*." Only English-language, peer-reviewed publications aligned with the research focus were included. Non-academic sources and studies unrelated to the Chinese setting were excluded.

The selected literature was examined using **thematic analysis** as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved familiarizing with the material, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, and synthesizing findings into a coherent analytical narrative. Trustworthiness was ensured through clear documentation of search procedures, adherence to inclusion criteria, and transparent reporting, consistent with the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. This method provided a structured yet

flexible foundation for synthesizing existing scholarship on how WLB is portrayed in Chinese literature, offering a comprehensive understanding without the limitations of field-based research.

4 Finding and Discussions

4.1 Work-Life Balance Challenges in China: Key Determinants

This article set out to identify the key determinants underlying work–life balance (WLB) challenges among employees in China. Drawing on a synthesis of recent literature, the findings reveal that WLB in China is shaped by the interaction of three major clusters of factors: structural and cultural drivers of imbalance, gendered social role expectations, and the design and implementation of organizational policies and flexibility initiatives. Rather than operating in isolation, these determinants reinforce each other, producing a context in which overwork, unequal role burdens, and limited access to meaningful flexibility combine to make WLB challenges both persistent and difficult to reform. This section discusses each of these themes and connects them to relevant theoretical frameworks.

4.2 Structural and Cultural Drivers of Imbalance

The first and most prominent set of determinants concerns the structural and cultural forces that normalize and sustain overwork. A recurring example in the literature is the so-called “996” culture, in which working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, is regarded as a standard expectation rather than an exception. Chandra (2012) shows that many employees internalize this pattern as a necessary condition for professional success, while organizations explicitly or implicitly equate long working hours with loyalty and productivity. Ding et al. (2020) link such excessive hours to serious health risks, including chronic illness, anxiety, and sudden death, drawing parallels with Japan’s *karoshi* phenomenon. These studies indicate that work–life imbalance in China is not merely a matter of individual ambition but is structurally reinforced and culturally legitimized.

Qualitative evidence reinforces this picture. Xiao and Cooke (2012), based on interviews with 122 professionals, report that employees frequently work more than sixty hours per week without overtime pay, and many describe this as a sign of resilience rather than exploitation. Zheng and Surienty (2024) further demonstrate that human resource interventions tend to be fragmented, often focusing on financial incentives rather than structural changes, thereby leaving the underlying norm of overwork unchallenged. From an institutional perspective, Wei and Ye (2022) note that although Chinese labor laws formally limit working hours, lax enforcement allows organizations to bypass regulations, particularly in sectors such as academia and state-owned enterprises. When compared with Western contexts where overtime pay, parental leave, and other protections are more consistently enforced (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018), China appears to exhibit a pronounced gap between formal legislation and workplace reality. This aligns with Brough et al. (2008), who observe that many developing economies prioritize economic growth over labor protection, with China representing an acute case of this trade-off.

These structural weaknesses are tightly intertwined with cultural expectations rooted in Confucian values, such as diligence, obedience to authority, and filial piety. Xu (2019) shows that employees are expected to fully devote themselves to their organization while simultaneously meeting extensive family obligations, including caregiving for children and aging parents. Zheng and Surienty (2024) find that many employees perceive work–life conflict as unavoidable, treating it as a normal part of life rather than a problem to be negotiated or challenged. Comparative studies illustrate how culture shapes the practical use of WLB policies: Pocock et al. (2010) find that Australian employees increasingly expect and use flexible arrangements, whereas Chandra (2012) reports that Chinese employees often hesitate to request accommodations for fear of being perceived as uncommitted. In theoretical terms, this dynamic can be understood through Greenhaus and Beutell’s (1985) work–family conflict model and Bakker and Demerouti’s (2007) Job Demands–Resources framework: high job demands, weak institutional resources, and cultural norms that discourage boundary negotiation jointly escalate role conflict and strain.

At the same time, emerging evidence suggests slow but notable shifts, particularly among younger employees. Chandra (2012) and later studies describe the rise of movements such as *tang ping* (“lying flat”), where younger generations explicitly reject extreme overtime in favor of personal well-being. Lee and Cho (2020) report similar patterns in South Korea and Japan, indicating a broader East Asian trend in which traditional overwork cultures are increasingly contested. These developments imply that while structural and cultural drivers remain powerful determinants of WLB challenges, they are not immutable and may gradually be reshaped by generational change and global influences.

4.3 Gender and Social Role Expectations

A second major determinant of WLB challenges in China relates to gendered social roles and expectations. Although women’s participation in the labor force has increased, traditional norms continue to position them as primary caregivers within the household. This produces what the literature repeatedly describes as a “double shift”: paid work during the day and unpaid domestic labor at home (Liu & Cheung, 2015). Xiao and Cooke (2012) find that women professionals report higher levels of work–life conflict than men because they are expected to manage both career and extensive household duties. Zheng and Surienty (2024) similarly observe that women often internalize caregiving as an inevitable responsibility, even when it undermines their career progression and well-being.

Chen and Zhang (2019) identify a “motherhood penalty” in Chinese workplaces, where married women with children face greater stress and slower career advancement than male colleagues. Liu and Cheung (2015) argue that this pattern reflects deeply embedded gender role expectations, not simply individual choices. While some studies, such as Liu et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2018), report that in extremely demanding professions like medicine both men and women express similarly low satisfaction with their work–life balance, these findings must be interpreted cautiously. Even when reported satisfaction levels converge, women typically continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving, meaning their total load remains heavier and their WLB challenges more complex than those of men.

Organizational and policy responses have so far done little to disrupt these gendered expectations. Wang and Lawler (2017) note that while maternity leave is legally mandated, many employers view it as a cost and sometimes discriminate against women of childbearing age. Chen and Zhang (2019) highlight that men rarely take parental leave even when it is available, reinforcing the assumption that caregiving is a female responsibility. Comparative studies underscore how limited such arrangements remain: Bünning (2015) finds that extended parental leave and part-time options in Europe contribute to greater gender equality, while O’Brien and Twamley (2017) show that paternity leave in Nordic countries encourages men’s involvement in caregiving and reduces traditional gender role divides. In contrast, the Chinese system tends to reproduce, rather than challenge, traditional norms.

These findings can be interpreted through Gender Role Theory and Work–Family Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), which together explain how socially constructed expectations about appropriate male and female roles shape behavior and intensify conflict when demands from work and home domains are incompatible. In China, these norms act as powerful determinants of WLB challenges by assigning women a dual role and leaving men less engaged in domestic responsibilities. As a result, gender remains a key axis of inequality in WLB outcomes, with structural and cultural determinants reinforcing one another.

4.4 Organizational Policies, Flexibility, and Their Limits

The third determinant of WLB challenges concerns the design, availability, and actual use of organizational policies and flexible work arrangements. The literature indicates that organizational interventions in China are uneven and often limited in scope. Zheng and Surienty (2024) find that most initiatives consist of financial allowances or

occasional welfare programs rather than embedded, structural reforms. Xiao and Cooke (2012) likewise observe that employers tend to prioritize material compensation over reduced workloads or flexible scheduling, meaning employees continue to face long hours despite nominal benefits.

In contrast to Western contexts, where flexible working arrangements (FWAs) such as job sharing, part-time work, and flexible hours are increasingly institutionalized (Lewis & Beauregard, 2018; Allen et al., 2013), Chinese organizations remain cautious and selective. Li and Chen (2023), however, provide promising evidence that when flexibility is genuinely implemented, through remote work, flexible scheduling, or compressed workweeks, and combined with autonomy and managerial support, employees report improved WLB and more positive attitudes towards their organizations. This suggests that FWAs have the potential to mitigate WLB challenges, but only when embedded in supportive cultures rather than offered as isolated perks.

Several barriers limit the effectiveness of such policies. Chandra (2012) finds that cultural norms equating presenteeism with loyalty deter employees from using FWAs, even when these are formally available. Workers fear that requesting flexible options will damage their reputation or career prospects. Wang and Lawler (2017) note that weak labor protections mean that most WLB initiatives remain voluntary, employer-driven, and unevenly implemented. Cooke (2020) adds that state-owned enterprises tend to be especially resistant to flexibility due to rigid hierarchies and bureaucratic cultures, while some private firms experiment with flexibility primarily to attract and retain young talent. Even then, access is often limited to managerial or highly skilled employees, reinforcing workplace hierarchies.

The COVID-19 pandemic briefly disrupted these patterns, forcing many organizations to adopt remote work and flexible arrangements (Zhang et al., 2021). Although many firms subsequently reverted to traditional practices, this period demonstrated the feasibility of alternative models and opened up new conversations about flexibility in China. Large companies such as Alibaba and Tencent have begun introducing wellness programs and limited flexible leave (Cooke, 2020), signalling nascent recognition that WLB is connected to sustainability, innovation, and talent retention. Taken together, these findings indicate that organizational policies are a crucial but currently underutilized lever in addressing WLB challenges in China. Where flexibility is absent, symbolic, or culturally stigmatized, it does little to relieve pressure on employees. Where it is genuinely supported and equitably implemented, it can function as a significant resource within the Job Demands–Resources framework, offsetting high demands and buffering against strain.

Overall, the findings show that work–life balance challenges in China are driven by a convergence of structural, cultural, gendered, and organizational determinants. Long working hours, weak enforcement of labor regulations, and hierarchical management practices are reinforced by Confucian values that prize diligence and obedience; gender norms assign women a disproportionate share of caregiving, deepening their WLB difficulties; and organizational policies, while emerging in some sectors, remain fragmented and constrained by cultural stigma and institutional weakness. At the same time, generational shifts, global comparisons, and post-pandemic experimentation with flexibility suggest that the landscape is not static. For WLB challenges to be meaningfully addressed, reforms must tackle not only formal policies but also the structural and cultural conditions that shape how those policies are perceived and used.

5 Conclusion

This literature-driven assessment demonstrates that work–life balance (WLB) plays a pivotal role in shaping employee well-being in China. The reviewed studies show that poor WLB consistently contributes to emotional exhaustion, burnout, elevated stress, and symptoms of depression, while also fostering patterns of workaholism that further undermine psychological health. These effects are intensified by cultural norms that valorize long

working hours and by organizational practices that blur the boundaries between work and personal life. In contrast, employees who experience a stronger sense of balance report higher job satisfaction, greater overall well-being, and stronger commitment to their organizations, indicating that WLB functions as a vital resource for maintaining motivation and sustaining performance.

The findings also highlight that the implications of WLB extend beyond individual health to influence organizational stability and broader societal trends. Organizations that fail to address WLB face higher turnover, lower morale, and reduced productivity, whereas those that implement meaningful flexibility and supportive policies benefit from greater employee loyalty and improved performance. At the societal level, persistent work–family conflict contributes to declining fertility, intensified caregiving pressures, and long-term demographic challenges. These patterns suggest that WLB is not merely a workplace concern but an issue with significant implications for national development and social well-being.

Although recent shifts in attitudes, such as increased interest in flexible work arrangements and rising resistance to extreme overtime among younger employees, indicate that change is possible, more substantial reforms are required. Improving WLB in China will require coordinated efforts that involve organizational policy changes, stronger institutional protections, and cultural shifts that move away from the traditional valorization of overwork. The evidence suggests that meaningful progress will depend on creating work environments that recognize employees as whole individuals with responsibilities and needs that extend beyond the workplace.

Overall, this article shows that achieving healthier and more sustainable work–life conditions is essential for enhancing employee well-being, strengthening organizational resilience, and supporting long-term social and economic stability in China. Future research could explore how emerging workplace innovations, generational value shifts, and evolving economic conditions may contribute to more balanced and inclusive work cultures in the years ahead.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank University of Mataram for supporting this research.

Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive any financial support.

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