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WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING IN CHINA: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

This article provides a literature-based assessment of how work–life balance (WLB) influences employee well-being in China by synthesizing peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2025. Drawing on thematic analysis, the review identifies a strong relationship between poor WLB and negative psychological outcomes, including emotional exhaustion, burnout, stress, depressive symptoms, and workaholic behavior. These effects are amplified by cultural expectations that valorize long working hours and by organizational norms that blur boundaries between professional and personal life. The findings also reveal gendered disparities, as women disproportionately bear caregiving responsibilities that heighten work–family conflict and emotional strain. In contrast, supportive WLB conditions, particularly those involving credible flexibility, managerial trust, and autonomy, are associated with higher job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and improved overall well-being. Beyond individual outcomes, the study highlights broader implications for organizations and society, including increased turnover, reduced productivity, declining fertility rates, and intensified caregiving burdens in an aging population. Although recent workplace innovations and shifting values among younger employees suggest growing recognition of WLB’s importance, substantial cultural and structural obstacles remain. The article underscores that improving WLB is critical for enhancing employee well-being, strengthening organizational resilience, and supporting long-term social sustainability in China.

Keywords: work–life balance, employee well-being, burnout, mental health, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, workaholism, China.

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1 Introduction

Employee well-being has become an increasingly prominent topic within organizational research, particularly as modern workplaces evolve in response to globalization, digital transformation, and shifting economic demands. In China, these developments have generated a fast-paced work environment in which employees often find their professional roles expanding beyond traditional boundaries. As organizations strive for greater competitiveness and productivity, long working hours, intensified job

responsibilities, and heightened performance pressures have become common features of Chinese employment contexts (Dodanwala et al., 2023). Such conditions place employees at substantial risk of experiencing work-life imbalance, a phenomenon closely linked to stress, physical exhaustion, and deteriorating mental health (Roopavathi & Kishore, 2021).

Work-life balance, defined as an individual's ability to allocate time and energy effectively across professional and personal domains, plays a central role in shaping broader dimensions of employee well-being (Shankar & Bhatnagar, 2010). Research highlights that workers who achieve balance are more likely to report enhanced job satisfaction, greater psychological stability, and overall improved quality of life (Delecta, 2011). Yet, while the positive connection between WLB and well-being is well established in Western scholarship, significantly less is known about how this relationship operates within China's distinct cultural and institutional landscape. Chinese employees often navigate a complex interplay of traditional family expectations, collective social norms, and demanding organizational cultures, leading to unique patterns of work-life strain (Zheng & Surienty, 2024).

Additionally, demographic and structural factors, such as population aging, a shrinking workforce, and the rising need for dependent care, further intensify pressures on employees, potentially undermining their resilience and overall well-being (Nadash et al., 2023). These challenges suggest that work-life balance is not merely a matter of individual time management but is deeply embedded in broader socio-economic conditions. Despite this, comprehensive literature-based assessments that examine how WLB shapes employee well-being specifically within the Chinese context remain limited.

This article addresses this gap by synthesizing recent academic literature to evaluate the relationship between work-life balance and employee well-being in China. Through a systematic review of peer-reviewed studies, it explores how work-life conditions influence psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of well-being among Chinese workers. By contextualizing these findings within China's rapidly changing labor environment, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of WLB's implications for workforce sustainability. Moreover, the discussion offers evidence-based insights that may guide organizations, policymakers, and human resource practitioners in designing strategies that support healthier, more balanced, and more productive working lives.

2 Literature Review

Work-life balance (WLB) has become increasingly recognized as a central component of employee well-being, particularly as modern workplaces grow more complex and demanding. Scholarly definitions consistently emphasize that WLB involves managing relationships between work and non-work roles in ways that reduce conflict and support overall life satisfaction (Shankar & Bhatnagar, 2010; Delecta, 2011). From this perspective, well-being is not simply the absence of stress but a broader state of psychological, emotional, and physical stability. Research demonstrates that employees who achieve a sense of balance often report higher job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and improved personal well-being, highlighting the close connection between role harmony and quality of life.

The literature identifies several theoretical frameworks that help explain why WLB plays such an important role in shaping well-being outcomes. Spillover Theory suggests that positive or negative

experiences in one domain, such as job satisfaction, stress, or fatigue, carry over into other areas of life, affecting emotional functioning and daily interactions (Staines, 1980; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Border Theory explains that employees' ability to transition between work and personal roles influences their psychological comfort, meaning that well-being is closely tied to how successfully individuals manage boundaries between these domains (Clark, 2000). Complementing these perspectives, Role Theory highlights that occupying multiple roles can either enrich well-being or strain it, depending on the support and resources available to individuals (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Marks, 1977). Together, these theories illustrate that well-being is deeply shaped by how employees navigate competing responsibilities and the emotional demands associated with them.

Within the Chinese context, the relationship between WLB and employee well-being is receiving increased attention as work environments evolve alongside broader societal changes. Studies note that contemporary Chinese employees often face expanding work expectations and complex family responsibilities, heightening the importance of understanding how balance influences their mental health and daily functioning (Xu, 2019). Chinese scholarship increasingly highlights the role of organizational culture in shaping well-being, emphasizing that supportive environments, such as workplaces that acknowledge family responsibilities or offer flexibility, can enhance emotional resilience and overall satisfaction (Marchington et al., 2016). These discussions highlight that well-being is not solely dependent on individual coping strategies but is strongly shaped by organizational structures and social expectations. International literature also provides evidence that structured WLB policies positively affect psychological health, reducing stress, burnout, and conflict while increasing motivation and emotional stability (Omar et al., 2020). Although such findings primarily originate from Western contexts, they have informed discussions in China regarding the potential benefits of integrating employee-centered policies into HR practices. Some studies suggest that flexible arrangements, when effectively designed and supported, help employees maintain equilibrium between work and life, thereby improving their sense of control and well-being (Kim et al., 2023). However, scholars caution that the effectiveness of these policies may vary across cultural settings, meaning that well-being outcomes depend on how policies are interpreted and enacted within Chinese workplaces.

Demographic trends also contribute to growing scholarly attention on well-being. With shifting family structures, increased participation of women in the workforce, and rising caregiving responsibilities, Chinese employees experience multiple demands that directly influence their emotional and physical well-being (Nadash et al., 2023). These broader social dynamics underscore the importance of WLB as a foundation for maintaining stable mental health, particularly in contexts where work and family roles are deeply interconnected.

Overall, the literature portrays work-life balance as a key determinant of employee well-being, especially in environments undergoing rapid economic and social change. In China, where cultural expectations, organizational norms, and demographic realities continue to evolve, WLB is increasingly viewed as essential for sustaining psychological health, strengthening job satisfaction, and supporting long-term quality of life. Existing research highlights the need to further explore how culturally grounded interpretations of WLB shape well-being outcomes, providing an important foundation for developing policies and practices that foster a healthier and more resilient workforce.

3 Method

This article employed a library-based methodology, consistent with the approach outlined in the thesis. The study relied exclusively on secondary sources, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional publications, to explore the relationship between work–life balance (WLB) and employee well-being in China. The timeframe of 2010 to 2025 was applied to ensure coverage of both early conceptual discussions and recent shifts influenced by globalization, digitalization, and workplace changes. A systematic literature search was conducted through Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar using keyword combinations such as “*work–life balance*,” “*employee well-being*,” “*China*,” “*job satisfaction*,” and “*organizational policies*.” Inclusion was limited to English-language, peer-reviewed works directly addressing WLB or well-being within the Chinese workforce. Studies lacking relevance or methodological rigor were excluded following the same screening logic described in the thesis.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the literature, identifying recurring patterns, refining themes, and integrating them into a synthesized interpretation. This approach allowed the article to examine how WLB is linked to psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of well-being. The research-maintained trustworthiness by applying systematic search procedures, transparent documentation, and adherence to the qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Through this method, the article presents an academically grounded, literature-driven assessment of how WLB influences employee well-being in China.

4 Result

4.1 Work–Life Balance and Employee Well-Being in China

This article examined how work–life balance (WLB) influences employee well-being in China through a synthesis of contemporary literature. The findings consistently show that poor WLB contributes to multiple dimensions of employee strain, including emotional exhaustion, burnout, psychological distress, and compulsive work behaviors. Conversely, supportive work environments and equitable flexibility improve life satisfaction, organizational commitment, and retention. Together, these insights indicate that WLB functions not merely as a personal preference or scheduling issue, but as a central determinant of individual health, organizational sustainability, and broader social stability. Four themes emerged from the analysis: emotional exhaustion and burnout, mental health and workaholism, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and broader organizational and societal implications.

4.2 Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout

One of the most frequently reported outcomes of poor WLB in China is emotional exhaustion and burnout. Wei and Ye (2022) demonstrate that employees who experience persistent work–family conflict exhibit significantly higher levels of exhaustion compared to those who perceive better balance. These findings align with the Job Demands–Resources model, which posits that burnout arises when job demands are consistently high and resources for coping and recovery are low. In the Chinese context, this imbalance is intensified by structural expectations such as heavy workloads, limited autonomy, and the normalization of extended working hours.

International research similarly supports the link between conflict and burnout, yet the intensity of China's situation is amplified by the cultural glorification of extreme overtime. The widely known 996 schedule illustrates how the boundaries between dedication and overwork become blurred. Ding et al. (2020) report that chronic overwork leads to serious physical and psychological risks, including fatigue, anxiety, and cardiovascular complications, reflecting patterns comparable to Japan's *karoshi* phenomenon.

Qualitative findings underscore how deeply these norms are internalized. Xiao and Cooke (2012) show that many employees, despite regularly working more than sixty hours a week without overtime pay, interpret such sacrifices as a sign of perseverance and professionalism. This internalization reduces the likelihood of resistance or calls for reform and contributes to a culture in which burnout becomes normalized rather than seen as preventable.

Compared with Western contexts, where employee assistance programs, regulated working hours, and organizational well-being initiatives help mitigate burnout, Chinese workplaces often lack systemic safeguards. As a result, burnout in China is not solely a reaction to workload, but an outcome shaped by organizational practices, cultural expectations, and insufficient institutional protections.

4.3 Mental Health, Stress, and Workaholism

Poor WLB also has severe implications for mental health, contributing to symptoms such as anxiety, stress, and depression. Yang et al. (2020) finds that employees experiencing high job demands and chronic fatigue report significantly elevated psychological distress. Their findings show that WLB is not merely a moderator of workplace satisfaction but a central factor influencing mental health outcomes.

Liu and Cheung (2015) reveal gendered dimensions within this pattern, showing that women, particularly those responsible for caregiving, bear a disproportionately heavy emotional and psychological burden. This dual responsibility magnifies stress and increases employees' vulnerability to depressive symptoms. The findings echo broader theories of work–family conflict, demonstrating how incompatible demands between home and workplace responsibilities lead to cumulative strain.

Workaholism further complicates the relationship between WLB and well-being. In many Chinese workplaces, long hours are interpreted as a sign of ambition and loyalty, creating a cultural environment that promotes compulsive work behaviors. Wei and Ye (2022) show that employees, particularly in academia, frequently blur the lines between professional and personal life, normalizing after-hours work and constant availability. These compulsive patterns, sustained by organizational expectations and internalized cultural norms, lead to disrupted sleep, emotional withdrawal, and chronic stress.

Comparative evidence reveals that while mental health consequences of imbalance exist globally, their severity is heightened in contexts where cultural norms discourage seeking help and institutional support is limited. Shimazu et al.'s (2010) study of Japanese workers demonstrates similar patterns of overwork leading to mental health decline, suggesting a broader East Asian trend shaped by collectivist values and hierarchical expectations. In contrast, Western employees may benefit from structured mental health support, open discussions of psychological strain, and institutionalized well-being programs, reducing the intensity of negative outcomes.

Taken together, these findings show that poor WLB in China plays a significant role in shaping mental health trajectories, highlighting the urgency of addressing both organizational practices and cultural norms that perpetuate harmful work behaviors.

4.4 Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Beyond its psychological effects, WLB strongly influences job satisfaction, retention, and commitment within organizations. Wei and Ye (2022) find that employees who report greater balance between work and personal responsibilities are significantly more satisfied with their jobs and display lower turnover intention. This indicates that WLB is not merely a peripheral employee preference but a core factor shaping organizational stability and performance.

Li and Chen (2023) offer further evidence by examining the positive effects of flexible working arrangements, including remote work, flexible scheduling, and compressed workweeks. When accompanied by managerial trust and autonomy, these arrangements significantly enhance employee morale, perceived well-being, and loyalty. Employees interpret such practices as signs that their organization respects their personal time and values their well-being, fostering a deeper sense of attachment.

However, consistency and accessibility remain critical. Xiao and Cooke (2012) warn that superficial or selectively applied WLB policies often create skepticism and erode organizational trust. When flexibility is offered only to managerial or highly skilled employees, frontline workers may perceive inequity, undermining the effectiveness of such initiatives. This highlights that policy design, implementation consistency, and organizational culture must align for WLB to translate into genuine satisfaction and commitment.

Given the rise of younger workers in China who increasingly prioritize personal life, autonomy, and well-being, organizations that fail to address WLB may face growing challenges in talent retention. In competitive labor markets, WLB thus becomes not only a matter of employee well-being but also a strategic asset for organizational competitiveness.

4.5 Broader Organizational and Societal Implications

The effects of WLB extend beyond individuals and organizations to broader societal outcomes. At the organizational level, poor WLB contributes to absenteeism, presenteeism, decreased productivity, and increased turnover. Wei and Ye (2022) show that imbalance erodes employees' cognitive and emotional capacity to sustain performance, making long-term productivity difficult to maintain. In contrast, organizations that invest in flexibility and well-being support benefit from stronger retention, greater stability, and enhanced performance.

At the societal level, chronic work–family conflict contributes to demographic challenges, including declining fertility rates and an increasing reluctance among younger couples to have children. Xu (2019) notes that the difficulty of balancing work and parenting responsibilities plays a significant role in China's declining birth rate, which has implications for economic sustainability and intergenerational support

systems. The burden of caregiving in an aging society further intensifies pressure on working adults, deepening existing work–life tensions.

Comparative evidence highlights that while WLB issues are global, their consequences are more severe in contexts with weak institutional supports and strong cultural norms favoring overwork. Studies from Western countries show that structured leave policies, regulated working hours, and employee assistance programs can mitigate many negative outcomes. In China, where such protections are less developed and cultural expectations remain deeply rooted, the consequences are more acute and far-reaching.

Recent developments, however, indicate a gradual shift. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted rapid adoption of remote work, challenging traditional notions of presenteeism and demonstrating the feasibility of alternative work arrangements. Large companies such as Alibaba and Tencent have also introduced wellness initiatives that acknowledge the risks of burnout and the need for healthier work cultures. The increasing popularity of movements like tang ping among younger workers suggests growing societal resistance to excessive work pressures. These changes highlight that China may be entering a transitional period in which WLB becomes a central consideration in organizational reform, talent management, and public policy.

The findings consistently show that work–life balance plays a critical role in shaping employee well-being in China. Poor balance contributes to emotional exhaustion, burnout, psychological distress, and compulsive work behavior, while supportive conditions and credible flexibility enhance job satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. At the broader level, WLB influences organizational sustainability and societal outcomes, including fertility rates, demographic stability, and long-term economic resilience. Addressing WLB is therefore essential not only for improving individual health but also for strengthening organizations and supporting broader social development in China.

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.

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Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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