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WORK – LIFE BALANCE AMONG EMPLOYEES IN CHINA: THE ROLE OF STRUCTURAL PRESSURES AND GENDERED SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of cultural and structural drivers of imbalance and gendered social role expectations on work–life balance (WLB) among employees in China. In the context of increasing work demands and persistent social expectations, maintaining work–life balance has become a significant challenge for employees. This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, with data collected from 82 employees across various sectors in China using a structured questionnaire. The data were analyzed using reliability analysis, Spearman’s correlation, and multiple linear regression through JASP to assess the relationships between cultural and structural drivers of imbalance, gendered social role expectations, and WLB. The results indicate that gendered social role expectations is a strong and statistically significant predictor of WLB ($\beta = 0.677$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that gendered social expectations play a major role in shaping employees’ work–life balance. In contrast, cultural and structural drivers of imbalance does not show a statistically significant direct effect on WLB ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = .195$). The model explains 74% of the variance in WLB ($R^2 = 0.74$), indicating substantial explanatory power. These findings suggest that work–life balance challenges in China are more strongly influenced by social and cultural expectations related to gender roles than by structural or organizational factors alone.

Keywords: work–life balance, China, structural determinants, gender roles, flexible work arrangements, work–family conflict

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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. Existing scholarship on work-life balance (WLB) in China demonstrates a tendency toward fragmentation, with many studies focusing on isolated dimensions rather than offering an integrated understanding of the phenomenon. For instance, Zhao and Lyu (2019) concentrate primarily on work-family conflict among female employees in knowledge-intensive business services, emphasizing burnout and performance outcomes while overlooking broader structural and cultural determinants. Similarly, Pan and Sun (2022) adopt a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of professional women, highlighting the influence of workplace culture and family expectations but limiting generalizability due to its narrow demographic focus. Other studies have examined specific relational dynamics, such as the impact of work-family conflict on life satisfaction or mental health, often treating these variables in isolation without situating them within a broader systemic framework (Ma et al., 2025).

In addition, culturally oriented research has underscored the role of Confucian values in shaping work attitudes and acceptance of overwork, yet such analyses frequently neglect the interaction between cultural norms and institutional or organizational structures. Collectively, these studies provide valuable insights into particular aspects of WLB; however, their segmented approaches result in a lack of comprehensive models that simultaneously account for structural pressures, cultural expectations, and gendered social roles. This gap highlights the need for a more integrative and empirically grounded approach that examines how these factors interact to influence employees' work-life balance within the Chinese context.

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 employed a quantitative research design to examine the determinants of work–life balance (WLB) among employees in China. Quantitative methods are appropriate for analyzing relationships between variables using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2014). In this study, WLB is the dependent variable, while cultural and structural drivers of and gendered social role expectations are the independent variables. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire using a Likert scale. A total of 82 respondents participated, selected through a non-probability sampling technique. The instrument was developed based on relevant literature to ensure content validity. Data were analyzed using JASP. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach’s alpha to assess internal consistency. Correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among variables, followed by linear regression analysis to determine the influence of cultural and structural drivers of imbalance and gendered social role expectations on WLB (Creswell, 2014).

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistic Analysis

The descriptive statistics reveal that all variables, including cultural and structural drivers of imbalance, gendered social role expectations, and WLB, were assessed using a comprehensive dataset of 82 valid replies, devoid of missing values, indicating a high-quality dataset appropriate for subsequent statistical analysis. The central tendency values indicate that all variables exhibit considerably elevated mean and median scores, with medians of 4.500 for cultural and structural drivers of imbalance and 4.625 for both gendered social role expectations and WLB. This indicates that respondents predominantly viewed all constructs favorably.

Moreover, the standard deviation values are comparatively low for cultural and structural drivers of imbalance = 0.823, meanwhile the gendered social role expectations = 0.789, WLB = 0.742), signifying that the responses exhibit minimal dispersion and predominantly converge around the mean. This indicates a largely uniform perception among respondents. The minimum and maximum values span from 1.000 to 5.000 across all variables, indicating the complete utilization of the Likert scale, hence augmenting the representativeness and variety of the data.

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

	Cultural and Structural Drivers of Imbalance	Gendered Social Role Expectations	Wlb
Valid	82	82	82
Missing	0	0	0

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

	Cultural and Structural Drivers of Imbalance	Gendered Social Role Expectations	Wlb
Median	4.500	4.625	4.625
Std. Deviation	0.823	0.789	0.742
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	5.000	5.000	5.000

4.2 Reliability Analysis

The reliability testing confirmed that all measurement scales demonstrated strong internal consistency, indicating that the instruments used in this study were reliable for assessing the constructs. The results show that cultural and structural drivers of imbalance achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.909, gendered social role expectations recorded 0.886, and work–life balance (WLB) obtained 0.875. All values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, suggesting a high level of reliability across constructs (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the confidence intervals for each variable remained within acceptable ranges, reinforcing the stability of the reliability estimates despite potential sampling variation. These findings indicate that all measurement items consistently represent their respective constructs, and therefore, the scales are appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses, including correlation and regression.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Table 4.2 Spearman's Correlations

			Spearman's rho	p
Mean cultural and structural drivers of imbalance	-	Mean gendered social role expectations	0.798	< .001

The Spearman Rank Correlation analysis indicates a robust and statistically significant positive association between cultural and structural drivers of imbalance and gendered social role expectations, evidenced by a correlation coefficient of 0.798 and a significance level of $p < 0.001$. This signifies those elevated levels of cultural and structural drivers of imbalance correlate with increased levels of gendered social role expectations. This correlation is classified as "very strong," indicating a significant link between the two variables. The significance level further substantiates that this association is not attributable to random chance but indicates a substantive pattern in the data. It is essential to recognize that correlation analysis solely identifies the bivariate link and does not indicate causality or consider the impact of additional variables in the model.

4.4 Linear Regression Analysis

The regression model exhibits substantial explanatory power, indicated by a R value of 0.860 and a R^2 value of 0.740. This signifies that almost 74% of the variance in WLB can be elucidated by the synergistic influences of cultural and structural drivers of imbalance and gendered social role expectations. The

Adjusted R^2 value of 0.734 indicates that the model retains stability after adjustments for the number of predictors and sample size. The F-statistic ($F = 112.5$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrates that the regression model is statistically significant overall. The independent factors together account for the variation in the dependent variable.

The ANOVA results further substantiate the model's significance by demonstrating that the regression model is considerably more well-fitting than a model without predictors ($p < 0.001$). The fact that the regression sum of squares is comparatively large in comparison to the residual sum of squares implies that the predictors account for the majority of the variation in WLB, rather than random error.

Moreover, The regression results indicate that cultural and structural drivers of imbalance does not have a statistically significant effect on WLB ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = 0.195$), suggesting that structural and cultural pressures do not directly predict employees' work–life balance in this model. In contrast, gendered social role expectations shows a strong and significant positive effect on WLB ($\beta = 0.677$, $p < 0.001$), with the highest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.721$), indicating that gendered social role expectations are the most influential factor affecting employees' work–life balance.

The VIF values (4.312) remain below the critical threshold, confirming that multicollinearity is not a concern. Overall, the model explains 74% of the variance in WLB, demonstrating substantial explanatory power, with gendered social role expectations emerging as the dominant predictor, while cultural and structural drivers of imbalance may require further investigation to identify indirect effects.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the factors influencing work–life balance (WLB) among employees in China, particularly in relation to cultural and structural drivers of imbalance and gendered social role expectations. The results reveal that gendered social role expectations has a significant and strong effect on WLB, while cultural and structural drivers of imbalance does not demonstrate a statistically significant direct influence. These findings highlight the complex and multidimensional nature of work–life balance challenges in the Chinese context.

The strong and significant effect of gendered social role expectations on WLB suggests that gendered expectations remain a dominant factor shaping employees' work–life experiences. This result supports previous studies which emphasize that traditional gender roles in China continue to assign primary caregiving and domestic responsibilities to women, even as their participation in the workforce increases (Pan & Sun, 2022). As a result, employees, particularly women, face a dual burden of professional and family obligations, which intensifies work–life imbalance. This finding also aligns with existing literature indicating that gender norms influence how individuals prioritize work and family roles, often leading to unequal distribution of responsibilities and increased stress (Ma et al., 2025). Therefore, gendered social role expectations can be understood as a critical social factor that directly contributes to the challenges employees face in maintaining balance between work and personal life.

In contrast, the non-significant effect of cultural and structural drivers of imbalance on WLB suggests that structural and cultural pressures may not directly determine employees' perceived work–life balance,

at least within the scope of this study. While prior research highlights the importance of long working hours, organizational demands, and workplace culture in shaping WLB (Zhao & Lyu, 2019), the present findings indicate that these factors alone may not be sufficient to explain variations in employees' experiences. One possible explanation is that such structural conditions are already normalized within the Chinese work environment, leading employees to perceive them as standard rather than problematic. Consequently, their impact on WLB may be indirect or mediated through other variables, such as individual coping strategies or organizational support mechanisms.

Another possible interpretation is that in influencing employees' perceptions of balance. While organizational demands create pressure, it is the expectation to fulfill family and social roles simultaneously that intensifies the conflict. This suggests that work–life imbalance is not solely a result of workplace conditions, but also deeply embedded in social and cultural expectations that shape individual responsibilities beyond the workplace. Furthermore, the high explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.74$) indicates that the selected variables, particularly gendered social role expectations, provide substantial insight into WLB challenges. This reinforces the argument that work–life balance in China is not only an organizational issue but also a socially constructed phenomenon, influenced by deeply rooted cultural norms and expectations. Overall, these findings suggest that addressing work–life balance challenges in China requires more than organizational reforms alone. While improving working conditions remains important, greater attention must be given to transforming gender norms and redistributing social responsibilities. Without addressing these underlying social expectations, efforts to improve WLB may remain limited in their effectiveness.

6. Implications

The findings of this study provide important implications for both organizations and policymakers in addressing work–life balance (WLB) challenges among employees in China. The significant influence of gendered social role expectations suggests that WLB issues are not only driven by workplace conditions but are also deeply rooted in social and cultural norms. Therefore, organizations should not rely solely on structural policies such as flexible working hours but also consider gender-sensitive approaches that acknowledge the unequal distribution of family responsibilities.

From a managerial perspective, companies are encouraged to implement supportive practices such as flexible work arrangements, family-friendly policies, and employee assistance programs that specifically address the needs of employees facing dual work–family demands. In particular, creating a more inclusive organizational culture that supports both male and female employees in balancing professional and personal roles is essential.

At the policy level, the findings highlight the need for stronger support systems, such as parental leave policies and work–family balance initiatives, that encourage a more equal distribution of caregiving roles. Overall, improving work–life balance in China requires a combined effort between organizations and society to address both structural conditions and deeply embedded gender norms.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of work–life balance (WLB) among employees in China by analyzing the influence of cultural and structural drivers of imbalance and gendered social role expectations. The findings reveal that gendered social role expectations has a significant and strong effect on WLB, while cultural and structural drivers of imbalance does not demonstrate a statistically significant direct influence. These results suggest that work–life balance challenges in China are more strongly shaped by social expectations related to gender roles than by structural or organizational factors alone. Employees, particularly those expected to fulfill both professional and domestic responsibilities, are more likely to experience difficulties in maintaining balance. This highlights that WLB is not only an organizational issue but also a social and cultural one. In conclusion, improving work–life balance in the Chinese context requires greater attention to gender norms and social role expectations, in addition to workplace policies. Addressing these underlying social factors is essential to achieving more sustainable and effective work–life balance outcomes for employees.

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Ethical Considerations

Not Applicable

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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