**TITLE**

**Perceived balance and experienced imbalance: the superficial and unsustainable work-life balance of Chinese employees.**

**ABSTRACT**

Underpinned by work-life/family and HRM literature, this research seeks to gain a robust understanding of the work-life balance (WLB) discourse in the Chinese context. While work-life issues in newly industrializing economies are gaining increasing salience, the perception and experience of Chinese employees’ WLB remain vague and under-researched. Drawn from the overall-based approach (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007), in this paper work-life discourse is contextually scoped to understand Chinese employees’ perceptions and the Job-demand and Resource model (Demerouti, et al., 2001) is applied to examine the influence of dominated work elements on employees’ WLB experience. The study is a mixed methods case study drawing upon 312 questionnaires, 23 semi-interviews, and official documents to identify and explore participants’ perceptions and experiences of WLB in two Chinese state-owned business groups.

The research findings indicate that these employees tend to embrace work-life integration and enrichment rather than identifying with the traditional segmentation and conflict perspectives dominant in western literature (e.g. Nippert-Eng 1995; greenhaus and beutell 1985). While a relatively positive WLB picture is painted from analysing employees' perceptions, it is argued that this is both superficial and unsustainable: long working hours, heavy workload, and employer-focused flexibility have largely eroded these employees’ personal life, critically challenging the reported balance.

This contradiction in essence derives (primarily) from the irreconcilable work-life collisions between employees’ ever-growing needs of better life and the logic of the intensified labour process under the market economy, and the power inequality in the employment relationship. Employees, as passive recipients, tend to yield to the exogenous forces and identify with a relative satisfactory WLB based upon work-focused enrichment. Given that, it is argued that although aspects of Chinese culture, such as 'harmony' and 'self-dedication' contribute to this interpretation of work-life integration and enrichment (e.g. Ling and Powell, 2001; Lu et al., 2010), these perceptions of balance appear to be a rhetorical response, and is not sufficient in explaining the work-life nature and relationship.

The research contributes to validate western WLB frameworks in the non-western context and provides a critical analysis of how the contextually influenced meaning of work-life discourse can be interpreted through multi-data triangulation. The superficial and unsustainable WLB Chinese employees experience reflects the nature of work and lived work-life experiences in the context of globalising capitalism, which can apply for the wider workforce in most of Global North and South, notwithstanding the particular relevance of the Chinese context. The results of this study urge the need for further research into work-based demands and resources as predictors of perceived organisational work-life support as well as suggesting implications for managerial practice.

**SUITABLE STREAM**

Stream 3: Work and employment in the Global South. Beyond established narratives and disciplines

Stream 6: Grey zones of work and employment in comparative perspective

**KEYWORD**

Work-life balance (WLB), Perceptions, Experience, Chinese employees, mixed methods