**TITLE**

**The problematics of work-life management: evidence from Chinese employees.**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper critically examines the demand for, as well as the development and effectiveness of, formal and informal approaches to work-life management within Chinese organisations. While work-life issues are gaining increasing salience as rapid industrial transformation and work intensification impact on Chinese employees’ work-life balance (WLB), over 95% of research into the work-family/life interface looked at the Global North (Kossek et al., 2011; Casper et al., 2007), the research and development of HRM in addressing these issues remain scant in China.

The existing research found that formal WLB policies and practices and informal supportive workplace context could be the "best practice and context" that benefit employees' WLB and organisational sustainability (e.g. Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Lu, 2015). However, criticism raised that the external business pressures and internal values of strategical HRM, mainly focusing on economic values, may marginalise the "best practice and context" (Guest, 2017; Fleetwood, 2007). This paper, drawing on critical management studies of WLB (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Daniels and French, 2006) and Social exchange theory (Blau, 1960), seeks to unveil the under-documented formal and informal approaches to work-life management in the Chinese organisations, and critically analyse how these are made available and how they are effective for employees and the organisation (through employees’ enhanced performance). To do so, we conducted mixed methods in two pharmaceutical Chinese State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) leading to the data triangulations of 312 valid survey responses and 23 semi-structured interviews, supported by official documentary sources.

The research finds Chinese employees’ WLB is rarely considered in strategic HRM. Although an array of formal approaches to work-life management that originates from relevant work regulations, social policies, and organisational practices are available, the implementations are problematic. There may be gaps existing between the availability, usage, and effectiveness of these approaches, limiting their role as the “best practice”. Consequently, most WLB solutions are reached informally through line management. However, managers are not necessarily able to create and foster a ‘best context’ that influences employees’ WLB and organisational development; whilst managerial informality applied in a humanised way may promote reciprocal employee responses, in terms of attitudes and behaviours, managers’ subjectivity and favouritism, related to Guanxi in Chinese context, may be counterproductive.

The key contribution of this paper lies in providing critical insight into an understanding of the WLB discourse within Chinese HRM through multi-data triangulations. Rather than merely be relevant to the field of work-life management, this paper also contributes to a critical analysis of whole HRM process, highlighting the ineffective enforcement of formal HRM practices and the problems of managerial informality may lead to wider issues of transparency, fairness, and non-discrimination for HRM. The insights also raise important issues for Chinese policymakers and HR practitioners over the management of WLB.

**KEYWORD**

Work-life balance (WLB), Formal and informal approaches to work-life management, Chinese employees, mixed methods