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**Employee perceptions of work-life balance and formal and informal
approaches to work-life management:
a case study of China's pharmaceutical sector**

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Doctor of Philosophy

October 2019

Keele University

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who have encouraged and supported me throughout my PhD journey.

First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Steve French and Dr Jack Cao. Without a doubt, their invaluable guidance, constant support, and endless encouragement in supervising this process directed me to complete this research. Their professional attitudes to research deeply influenced me on the path of becoming an academic. The experience of being their student is the enormous fortune in my life.

This work would not have been possible without the support and help of several organisations and individuals. I am grateful for the financial support, GTA-ships, fieldwork and conference bursaries offered by Keele. A big thanks go to all my colleagues and friends for their sincere support and friendship. I would like to mention Prof Roger Seifert, Duangkamol Chongcharoen, Edna Jacobson, and Dr Wen Wang. I would also like to thank all of the staff and research participants at the organisations where I conducted my fieldwork. I appreciate their willingness, time, knowledge and professionalism – these formed the empirical basis for this research.

I could not have arrived at this stage without the enduring support, understanding and accompanies of my family. Special thanks to my parents, who are continuously dedicated to financially and emotionally support me as well as encouraging me, even though I, as their only child, could not stay with and care for them due to my long-term overseas study. It is their unconditional love that makes me brave enough to persist to the end. Last but not least, I offer my gratitude to Bo, for his unlimited support and encouragement, and always being a source of joy. He and my parents, with their continuous support throughout my studies, have given me the strength to achieve all my life and career goals.

Abstract

This thesis examines Chinese employees' perceptions and experience of work-life balance (WLB) and the relationship between management's formal application of WLB policies and practices, and the reality experienced by the employee. WLB in China has been largely neglected in WLB and HRM literature to date. However, WLB as a socially constructed concept is a worthy topic to be researched in China, given the dynamic external environment and unique management context. The development of HRM within Chinese organisations also provides opportunities for examining WLB approaches in relation to organisational policies and practices.

The research strategy is based upon a pragmatist methodological approach and utilises mixed methods research derived from a deductive theoretical framework. A single case study of two Chinese State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) in the pharmaceutical sector is used. The research conducted led to the collection of 312 valid survey responses and 23 semi-structured interviews, supported by (limited) documentary sources. In responding to current WLB literature, this adoption of mixed methodology allows an examination and analysis of WLB issues in a non-western context in depth and breadth.

The research finds; first, there is no consensus over what WLB means in China. It would appear that employees experience unsustainable WLB due to long working hours, work intensification and limited formal work-life support. Despite this, the dominant views of employees indicate a relatively positive WLB in the sense of work-life integration and enrichment. Secondly, Chinese employees' WLB is rarely considered in strategic HRM. Formal approaches to work-life management rarely exist and are not followed. Consequently, most WLB solutions are reached informally through line management, which can be seen as a double-edged sword in influencing employees' WLB and organisational development.

The key contribution of this research lies in providing an understanding of WLB within the Chinese context, critically assessing the appropriateness of Anglo-American WLB literature to China. It also contributes to providing a critical insight into the demand for, as well as the development and effectiveness of, formal and informal approaches to work-life management within Chinese organisations. The insights also raise important issues for Chinese policymakers and HR practitioners over the management of WLB.

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Glossary

Chinese government	According to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese government is generally divided into central and local levels. China utilizes a centralized structure whereas local government is divided into four levels: provincial, municipal, county and town.
Chinese Communist party	The Communist Party of China (CPC) is the founding and sole ruling political party of the people's republic of China. There are eight other, subordinated parties co-existing that make up the United Front.
Components-based approach	A components-based approach considers that work-life balance is formed by different elements that predict and provide meaning to the concept of balance (Rantanen et al., 2011).
Overall-based approach	The overall-based approach offers a holistic perspective to conceptualise WLB without distinguishing components and direction of any imbalance.
Domains	Used to delineate ‘paid work’ and ‘life’...’worlds that people have associated with different rules, thought patterns and behaviour’ (Clark 2000:753).
Work domain	Paid work and extra work-related activities, such as business trips, commuting to work and work socialising.
Life domain	‘Family’ involving family care, domestic work and personal leisure time, rest and relaxation time, community involvement or social life.
Formal approaches to work-life management	Formal approaches to work-life management mean work-life balance policies and practices (WLBPPs). These consist of statutory regulations and formalised organisational initiatives that relate to employees’ work-life rights and benefits.
Informal approaches to work-life management	Informal approaches to work-life management refer to informal work-life supports in the workplace context (i.e. the WLB context) constructed by organisational culture, management (especially line management) and collegial supports.
Job/work demands	Job/work demands refer to “those physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” such as working hours, and workload (Demerouti et al., 2001:502).
Job/work resources	Job/work resources refer to “those physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of the job that may: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development.” (Demerouti et al., 2001:502). In this research, work resources particularly refer to those may facilitate employees’ WLB, including WLBPPs and WLB context.

Leave entitlements	The leave entitlements are set in Chapter 4, Labour Law of the People's Republic of China. It includes paid annual leave (festival leaves are included), sick leave, marriage leave, maternity-related leaves and breaks (breastfeeding leave). Notably, a) The rules set the legal bottom line for these leave entitlements. The duration of marriage and maternity leaves can vary in different regions. For example, municipal or provincial regulations may provide female employees with an additional 30–90 days of maternity leave. b) Paternity leave is not set at a national legal level; most municipal or provincial regulations stipulate male employees are entitled to paid paternity leave, the term of which varies from seven to 30 days. c) At the national legal level, there are no other parental leave rights that employers have to observe or which are regulated.
Leisure	Uncoerced activity was undertaken during the free time where the activity is something people want to do and is personally satisfying (Stebbins, 2004).
Line manager	Managers who have first-line responsibility for a workgroup. They are accountable to a higher level of management and are located in the lower layers of the management hierarchy, normally at the first level (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003: 4). The meaning of the line manager is often adopted in research on Chinese management (Huo et al., 2018). In this sense, there is not an explicit and substantive difference among between line manager, supervisor and superior in the Chinese context. Chinese employees get used to calling their line managers “leader”.
Path	“Path” used in this research refers to the inter-relationships between WLB-related variables (e.g. the link between the main work-related demands and employees’ WLB) within the theoretical framework of this research. The term is used from Chapter 3 onwards.
Work domination	Work domination is mostly reported by the participants of this research. It means an employee’s life is primarily occupied by work mainly in terms of time, energy and mental activity.
Work intrusion	Work intrusion refers to the negative spill-over of work into life.
Work-life balance	Work-life balance as an overall appraisal of the extent to which “individuals’ effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are consistent with their life values at a given point in time.” (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011:174)
Work-life compensation	Work/life domain makes up for any deficit in the other domain.
Work-life conflict	Work-life conflict is “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are

	mutually incompatible in some aspect.” (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985:77).
Work-life enrichment	Work-life enrichment refers to “the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role” (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006: 73).
Work-life integration	Work-life integration is defined as a process for reconciliation of work, family and individual self-demands and time (Lewis and Cooper, 2005).
Work-life spillover	Individuals’ roles in work and personal life can mutually intermingle either positively or negatively, spillover from one to the other domain, and influence individuals’ well-being and effective functioning.
Work-life segmentation	Work-life segmentation highlights the absolute separation of work and life. The segmentation can be mainly based on geography (workplace and home house) and gender roles (Male breadwinner and housewife).

List of Abbreviations

ACAS	The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
ACFTU	All-China Federation of Trade Unions
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CMB	Common method bias
CPC	Communist Party of China
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ER	Employment Relationship
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HRD	Human Resource Development
HRM	Human Resource Management
HPWS	High-Performance Work System
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IR	Industrial Relations
JV	Joint venture
MNC	Multinational corporation
POE	Privately owned enterprise
R&D	Research and Development
SASAC	State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council
SOE	State-owned enterprise
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
TVE	Township and village enterprises
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
WFC	Work-family conflict
WLB	Work-life balance
WLBC	Work-life balance context
WLBPPs	Work-life balance policies and practices
WLC	Work-life conflict

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This thesis examines Chinese employees' perceptions and experiences of work-life balance (WLB) and the relationship between management's formal application of WLB policies and practices, and the reality experienced by the employee. To begin with, this chapter presents the rationale for exploring Chinese employees' work-life balance and provides the justification for conducting this study in the under-researched Chinese context. It begins with a brief introduction to work-family/work-life balance literature and argues there is a scarcity of work-life research conducted in non-western contexts. Then, the work-life balance (WLB) related Chinese context is scoped, highlighting a research gap and justifying investigating Chinese employees' WLB and the significance of organisational work-life supports. Following from this, the research aims and questions are stated, and the research framework and methodological approach are briefly outlined. This chapter also provides a relevant justification of the study in terms of its practical contribution to management practice. An outline of the structure of the thesis completes the chapter.

1.1 Work-life balance research at a glance

The term "work-life balance" (WLB) is used prevalently but lack of an established definition in the research literature. Historically, work and family were primarily viewed as a conflicting issue, especially in respect of women with dependent care responsibilities. In the 1970s, the term, work-life balance (WLB) began to be referred to in published literature focusing upon studies of individual roles in paid work and personal (mainly family) life (Gregory and Milner, 2009). During the last two decades, WLB has been developed into a more holistic and inclusive research field because of globalisation, new

technologies, '24/7' workplaces, constant organisational reorganisation, the application of rigorous performance indicators, the weakening of trade unions in many contexts and the rising participation of females in the labour market, all of which have, blurred of the distinction between work and the home (Chandra, 2012). Thus, work-life balance, rather than work-family balance has developed, not only as an individual discourse but also a socially constructed concept. It relates to the complex and dynamic interaction between paid employment and non-work life domains (Lewis and Beauregard, 2018). Furthermore, the interaction is argued to be a bidirectional, work-to-life interference (WLI) and life-to-work interference (LWI). Most of the work-life research focuses on the WLI because it is not only more likely to occur and dominate than LWI (e.g. Frone, 2003), but also serves as an interest for HR researchers and policymakers. This is because WLI is more feasibly 'social-constructed' through the intervention of legislation and workplace policies and practices, whereas LWI largely relates to diverse and unpredictable personal issues beyond organisations' control (Keeney et al., 2013).

Prior to discussing WLB, the issue of the employment relationship and the operation of the labour market needs to be considered. On securing employment, people enter the labour market. They do this because they are dependent on work as their only form of income, so they have to sell their labour in exchange for pay. This wage-work bargain is not fixed, however, as workers only sell their ability to work under an indeterminate employment contract (Edwards, 2003), where the quantity and quality of work cannot be fixed. Consequently, employers' attempts, through their management, to exert additional effort from their workers is a central aspect of the study of HRM and the employment relationship. At the same time, workers attempt to resist these managerial practices, creating a struggle over the 'frontier of control' (Goodrich, 1920). As working hours can

be extended and work intensified, this creates the scope for work encroaching upon family and private life to the extent that work and life cannot be easily disconnected (Bloom, 2016; Lewis and Cooper, 2005). Therefore, the study of WLB cannot be detached from wider debates around the nature of work.

Within the employment relationship, employees find it difficult to control work demands to maintain a WLB. This is because, under the unequal and indeterminate nature of the employment relationship, employers have the power to control an employee's work in terms of time, intensity, flexibility, and benefits. This can mean that work spills over into life and impacts on WLB (Hyman, et al., 2003). WLB issues are, in essence, associated with labour management problems of control; and such control is mainly exercised through formal and informal job regulations. Formal job regulation can originate from the external legal framework and policy agenda to secure employees' work-life rights; as well as from the internal policies and practices within the organisation that employers have implemented to support employees' work-life benefits. At the same time, managers and employees may have different priorities and attitudes towards work-life issues and pursue their own job regulation in an informal way (Flanders, 1970). Labour management and control is recognised in some of the existing work-life literature (e.g. Fleetwood, 2007a, 2007b; Beauregard and Henry, 2009). Specifically, institutionalised formal supports, such as working hours regulation, flexible working arrangements, leave entitlements, childcare opportunities, support and well-being programmes and contextually-derived informal support, arising from the organisational culture, managerial decisions and collegial support, are critically discussed to be the 'best practice' within the work-life management.

Research into the formal approaches, namely WLB policies and practices, identify that their implementation is conducive to improving employee well-being and organisational sustainability, especially if embedded in a supportive organisational and managerial context (e.g. Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Lu, 2015). The main rationale to explain such positive work-life management is that of the ‘good employer’ which can be legitimate, rational and socially-responsible. There appears to be three cases, the “business case”, “institutional case”, and “social case”, which demonstrate the behaviour of a good employer in term of work-life management. First, current work-life research has been largely driven by the recognition of the “business case”. It is argued that the rational employer will treat their employees well by giving them good and fair pay, health and safety and WLB. The “business case” is derived from a ‘managerialist-determined HRM’ perspective, in which cost-effectiveness is a crucial goal of all HRM systems (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). This can be rooted in neo-classical economic theory (Hicks, 1969) namely that the employer makes the decision to provide employees’ nonpecuniary benefits for profit maximisation and cost-effectiveness in the labour market through supply and demand. Secondly, the legitimate employer follows external job regulations and implements proper internal regulations to control labour. This can be called the ‘institutional case’ explained by institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Thirdly, understanding and caring for employees’ WLB can be seen as a demonstration and achievement of corporate social responsibility (Norman and MacDonald, 2004), this can be a “social case” for adopting work-life management.

However, increasingly academics and employees have criticised the nature of "best practice" and argued against the idea that work-life management can be beneficial for both employees and organisations. As Guest (2017: 22) argues, "it seems a link between

HRM and performance has been pursued at the expense of concern for employee well-being". WLB issues is one of the focal concerns in employee well-being. The foremost critique particularly claims that WLB policies and practices are employer-friendly rather than employee-friendly (Fleetwood, 2007b). With the influence of neoliberalism and deregulation across most of the western developed world, the powerful corporations shape public policies and HRM practices that are advantageous to themselves. Therefore, in the practical implementation, "WLB" superficially implies an employee-led focus but as a matter of fact, the "favours" are granted by the employer/manager, making these an employer-friendly practice only (e.g. *ibid.*; Lewis et al., 2007; Özbilgin et al., 2011).

Consequently, the external business pressures and internal values of strategic HRM, mainly focusing on economic values such as productivity and efficiency, can blind managers, meaning the employer does not act out of care and concern for employees (Beer et al., 2015). In such a situation, the "business case" may create a win (employer)-lose (employee) situation, the "institutional case" may fail due to a lack of enforcement and effectiveness, and the "social case" is something to which employers merely pay lip service. With regard to WLB issues, the employer-friendly nature of HRM may largely reduce the availability, usage and effectiveness of formal and informal approaches to work-life management.

1.2 Setting the research in the Chinese context

As one aspect of the employment relationship, WLB issues vary across countries, cultures, sectors, organisations and occupations. Work-life issues in developing and newly industrializing economies are gaining increasing salience (Chandra, 2012; Lu and Cooper, 2012). China, as the second biggest economy and the biggest world labour market, is a particular case in point. Both western and non-western researchers, point out that the

Anglo-American perspectives on WLB are not adequate in understanding work-life issues in China, because the Chinese context is significantly different from Anglo-American societies (e.g. Ling and Powell, 2001; Fleetwood, 2007a; Cooke, 2013). It is argued that its unique political, socioeconomic and cultural characteristics provide a fertile research ground for examining WLB issues, with a view to testing and if necessary, redefining the WLB discourse and refining or revising work-life/work-family theories (Ling and Powell, 2001).

China has undergone rapid economic transformation and marketisation, notably in the urban areas, as well as social modernization since the government's decision in 1978 to pursue economic reform and open the country up to international markets. These dramatic changes, notably expressed in terms of intensified global competition and the expanding Chinese economy (Cooke, 2009a), have placed pressure on individuals' work-life balance, which have resulted in long working hours, work overload and work intensification for many employees in the work domain (Xiao and Cooke, 2012) and the rising cost of living and the increased pace of life in their personal life (Zhang, Li and Foley, 2014). With the rapid economic and social transitions, issues such as more performance pressure and less welfare support have occurred. Hence, the boundary of work and personal life is constantly being redrawn to create space for work demands, which may result in a critical imbalance between Chinese employees' work and life.

However, Chinese employees tend to see the imbalance as 'a matter of fact'. Existing research explains this tolerance from the perspectives of economics and culture. On the one hand, financial concerns lead Chinese employees to prioritise paid work over family life or leisure (Choi 2008; *ibid.*). On the other, cultural values, such as to 'strive for

collectivist benefits with self-sacrifice' may exert considerable influence on Chinese employees. Thus, overworking seems reasonable for Chinese employees as they are more likely to self-sacrifice their family time for work and eventually gain the benefits and status for their family. Ren and Caudle (2016) argue it is an approach that accepts short-term costs in exchange for long-term benefits under the influence of Chinese culture. In many ways, the prevalent domination of work leads to detrimental consequences. Chinese employees have suffered from various health issues, high sickness and turnover rates, and even karoshi¹. These could be seen not only the warnings of the limits to employee's tolerance of a work-life imbalance but also as signs of a growing desire for a better WLB (Cooke, 2013). Accordingly, researching WLB becomes a significant and imminent problem for Chinese workplaces, as employees who take the imbalance for granted are squeezed in the work-dominated workplace.

White-collar employees can be a focal point for analysing WLB issues in the Chinese labour market. Most Anglo-American studies primarily focus on this group of employees due to the nature of their job demands. Cooke (2013: 210) points out that "the boundary between work and personal sphere research on WLB needs to take into account the unique nature of work and the nature of workplace relations for specific groups." The group discussed here are white-collar employees who especially experience problems finding the time for private life because of the domination of work (Lewis, Gambles and Rapoport, 2007). The demanding nature of business pressures may make balancing work and life unattainable for this group of employees.

¹ Karōshi, which can be translated literally as "overwork death" in Japanese and Chinese, is occupational sudden mortality.

Whilst there is no precise definition of white-collar employees in China, there is a consensus that the term can apply to those undertaking mental office-based work, compared to their counterparts performing physical labour in the non-office area ('blue collar'). This is an important group in promoting the transformation of Chinese society and developing a knowledge economy (The Beijing News, 2016). They are relatively highly-educated and career-oriented, having knowledge and skills that are of value to organisations and they are difficult to replace from the external market (Blyton, 2011). Subjectively, this group of employees are argued to be more 'achievement-motivated' workers who are passionate about updating their knowledge and skills. They need to work hard, even excessively hard, in order to realise their career goals and meet the mentally-intensive demands embodied in their work. They might be treated as examples of employees possessing 'decent jobs', but the reality is that a significant proportion of them have low-level job quality in terms of employment security, wage levels, health and safety protection, provision of social security and working time (Cooke, 2013: 213). As the latest big data reported in the white paper of "Health Conditions of the white-collar workers in the Urban Areas of China" (Sohu, 2016) show: 76% of the urban white-collar workers in Mainland China are described as being in suboptimal health status², nearly 60% in the state of being overworked (in terms of working time and intensity). Such prolonged working hours increases work intensity, and psychological stress routinely disrupts family life, triggering the detrimental impacts for themselves, their family and their organisation.

² Suboptimal health status is a term which is widely used by Chinese people. People who are sub-healthy have any of a range of uncomfortable symptoms but without any obvious and diagnosable illnesses which can be identified through standard medical observation methods. It is also interpreted as different terms like "intermediate state", "grey state" or "a general malaise" (Li et al., 2013).

An awareness of the significance of WLB issues has emerged in Chinese society (Lu and Cooper, 2015) so that the possibility of trialling and adopting work-life management policies and practices appear promising from various lenses. In terms of the political agenda, optimistically, Chinese social development has been highlighted for the construction of a harmonious society and moving forward toward prosperity and happiness of the people (19th CPC National Congress report, 2017) where employees' work and life quality come into focus. Employment and HR policies are developed to recognise the risk of the work-life imbalance that the Chinese employees are suffering and seek to respond to the emerging expectation of WLB. With regard to the business case, Multinational corporations (MNCs) and some large private enterprises, especially in the high-tech sector, have started designing and applying WLB initiatives for retention and attraction purposes and wider business benefits (Chou and Cheung, 2013). The individual expectation of WLB has been increasingly growing. As Kelly Services (2015) show, the desire for flexible work arrangements and tighter restrictions on working hours is particularly strong in the broad Asia-pacific area. It is argued that work intensification and various life values/demands have awakened the employees' consciousness in pursuing WLB.

1.3 Gaps in the literature

WLB issues are not only commonplace in developed western societies but also in the emerging economies, such as China. However, over 95 % research in the work-family/life interface is based upon the Anglo-American and European context (e.g. Kossek, et al., 2011a; Casper et al., 2007). It is unclear how the WLB is interpreted in China, and very little research looks at this issue in HRM, even though it is argued that work intensification and scant work-life related benefits severely challenge employees' WLB (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

As work-life issues vary according to the national context, the Anglo-American perspective of WLB may not be adequate to understand work-life issues in China (e.g. Ling and Powell, 2001; Fleetwood, 2007a; Cooke, 2013). China's unique economic, institutional and cultural characteristics provide a fertile research ground for examining WLB issues, to redefine the WLB discourse and add a refinement on existing work-life/work-family theories (Ling and Powell, 2001). This leaves a significant gap for this research to address in seeking to understand the nature of Chinese employees' work and the capability of Chinese organisations to sustain long-term performance. Therefore, this research aims to examine and explore two issues, 1) the WLB derived perceptions and experience of Chinese employees and 2) the influence of relevant policies and practices at work as well as the wider social context on employees' WLB and their performance.

A developed understanding of WLB in China is, therefore, limited. While traditional Anglo-American work-family/life models consider employees' WLB as a largely personal issue, plenty of researchers argue it ignores a social-constructed discourse where multi-layered factors at the national, organizational, and individual level to influence individuals' perceptions and experience on WLB (e.g. Lewis and Beauregard, 2018; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). Among all these social layers, individuals' WLB is particularly influenced by what is normative, feasible, and socially acceptable in the workplace (Lewis and Beauregard, 2018). That is, individuals' work-life perceptions and experience tend to be more influenced by the work demands and resources, but organisational influence has been underestimated (Foucreault et al., 2018). Meanwhile, organisational demands and resources can be mainly shaped by national factors such as economic development, state support, socio-cultural immersion, and demographic change. Whilst cross-cultural work-life research approached have attempted to consider the

Chinese national context; it is mainly from a cultural-sensitive angle (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Lacking empirical research to address these multilayered factors fully means, therefore, that a robust understanding of Chinese WLB is lacking.

Work-life balance issues are rarely considered at the Chinese organisational level, and the availability and effectiveness of policies and practices have yet to be clarified. In the Anglo-American research, organizational demands and resources are argued to play a critical role that impacts on how an individual employee copes with work and life imbalance (Ren and Caudle, 2016). To be more specific, working hours and workload are widely demonstrated as dominating work-related demands, and negative relationships with WLB have been both theoretically and empirically examined. While the work demands are dominant in the Chinese workplace, few researchers have paid attention to the impact on employees' WLB. Regarding work resources in relation to WLB, the formal and informal approaches to work-life management are critically discussed to be a 'best practices' that facilitate employees' WLB and job performance in the Anglo-American work-life research. In the Chinese workplace, however, since the concept and considerations of WLB have not yet been developed, little formal work-life related policy agenda and HR practices are considered and put forward (Xiao and Cooke 2012). It is argued that Chinese employees generally have little sense of fair work-life exchange (Ren and Foster, 2011). As long as financial conditions allow, employees may seek alternatives to balance their work and life rather than voicing out and requesting assistance from the organisation (Cooke, 2013). However, Zheng and Lamond (2009) review the empirical studies on HRM practices in China across the past three decades and suggest when facing such a serious work-life tension, the employee tolerance is detrimental to the sustainability of human capital and organisation.

It should also be noted that, although a few formal work-life programmes have operated in foreign-owned MNCs in China and piloted in large private enterprises (Lu and Cooper, 2015; Cooke, 2013), it remains unclear whether and to what extent the availability and utilisation of policies and practices are perceived to be necessary by employees. Research has yet to move beyond studies of MNCs to investigate Chinese based companies, such as those which remain state-owned.

Researching WLB should become, therefore, a significant topic within Chinese HRM. Under the strong influence of western HRM, Chinese HRM focuses on general HRM systems (such as high performance and high commitment) from a unitary and proactive perspective focusing upon the business case and the unified interests of employees and employer. Given that, the emerging western and Chinese literature have started to argue that HRM systems can be a "double-edged sword" that benefit the organisation but also harm the well-being of employees (e.g. Guest, 2017; Beer et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2017a). Employees' WLB rights and need can be one of the typical victims in the profit-seeking of organisations. Accordingly, the call for well-being oriented HRM has been springing up (Guest, 2017). Likewise, in China, the editors of the top Chinese HRM journal – The Journal of Chinese Human Resource Development - suggest, taking Chinese HRM research forward requires acknowledging towards a bilateral and balanced perspective, considering both employees and organisational development. Researching Chinese employees' WLB and organisational approaches to work-life management can be a significant aspect to explore employees' wellbeing and organisational development in terms of balanced and sustainable perspectives.

1.4 Research aims and questions

As outlined above the central purpose of this study is to seek a robust understanding of WLB in an under-researched Chinese context, drawing on two streams of literature: work-family interface research as well critical management and HRM research. It aims to: 1) investigate Chinese employees' perceptions and experience of WLB; 2) examine whether and to what extent employees' WLB is impacted by the dominance of work demands (i.e. working time and workload) and resources (i.e. work-life balance policies and practices, and its relevant work context) at the organisational level; and 3) examine whether these resources work as 'best practices', which not only benefit employees' WLB and organisation (through employees' enhanced performance). Having outlined the aims, the following (sets of) research questions are proposed:

1. What are the general perceptions and experiences of WLB among Chinese employees?
2. a. How do work demands, especially working time and workload, impact Chinese employees' work-life experience?
b. Do Chinese employees' work-life experiences have an impact on their job performance?
3. a. What institutionalised policies and practices related to employees' work-life balance exist within the Chinese organisation?
b. How do these policies and practices, if any, impact on their work-life balance, and job performance?
c. Are these policies and practices available, used and effective?
4. a. What are the characteristics of the work-life context constructed within Chinese organisations?

- b. How does organisational, managerial and collegial support impact on Chinese employees' work-life experience and job performance?

1.5 The research framework

This research is undertaken by building a conceptual framework to help conceptualise the meaning of WLB, and a theoretical framework to analyse WLB through the lens of work-related demands, resources and outcomes. The conceptual framework is constructed to understand Chinese employees' WLB based on an 'overall-based approach' (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007) as is demonstrated below. WLB is considered as a socially-constructed concept (Lewis and Beauregard, 2018). The meanings of WLB are complex and dynamic and can be shaped at the national, organisational and individual level. Although WLB can be regarded as a personal issue, an individual's priorities in relation to their WLB are impacted by the demands of, and resources provided by, the work and home domains (ibid.), predominately work. These demands and resources are shaped by economic, cultural, social and political factors at the national level (e.g. Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013; Trefalt et al., 2013). Under the influence of multi-layered (external) factors, the boundary of work and life is blurred; the work-life relationship tends to be integrated rather than separated and, consequently, can involve the positive (enrichment) and negative (conflict) dimensions within a dynamic context.

This research aims at identifying and exploring employees' WLB at the organisational level. The theoretical framework seeks to explore the interplay of the main WLB related factors. Based upon the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), these factors are framed into two groups, work demands and resources. This research looks at how the employees' WLB is experienced by the dominated work demands (working hours and workload) and resources (work-life balance policies and practices, and its context). To be more specific,

working hours and work overload tend to exhaust employees through an energy depletion process, whereas job resources, including work-life balance policies and practices (WLBPPs) and a supportive WLB context (WLBC) at the organisational level, may facilitate a WLB. In addition, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) is included in the framework to interpret the effect of the two work groups on employees' job performance. In particular, this research looks at the norm of reciprocity, from Blau's sociological view, highlighting not only the economic rewarding process but the social obligation between employees and manager/employer under the impact of Chinese socio-cultural factors.

A significant body of academic literature has argued that the existence of work resources does not necessarily lead to a beneficial effect on WLB as expected. In particular, the use of WLBPPs is critically examined by adopting Budd and Mumford (2006), and Daniels and French's (2006) theoretical frameworks. These examine the extent to which: an employer/manager makes WLBPPs available; an employee can actually use the WLBPs, and an employee who used the WLBPPs perceive the positive effect on their WLB and work behaviour (e.g. job performance). As the effective use of work-life resources can be questioned, the beneficial social exchange between employees and an organisation may be seen as conditional. This research argues that only if employees perceive the work-life resources to be effective and distributed in a fair way, will they perform well; otherwise this can result in counterproductive work behaviour.

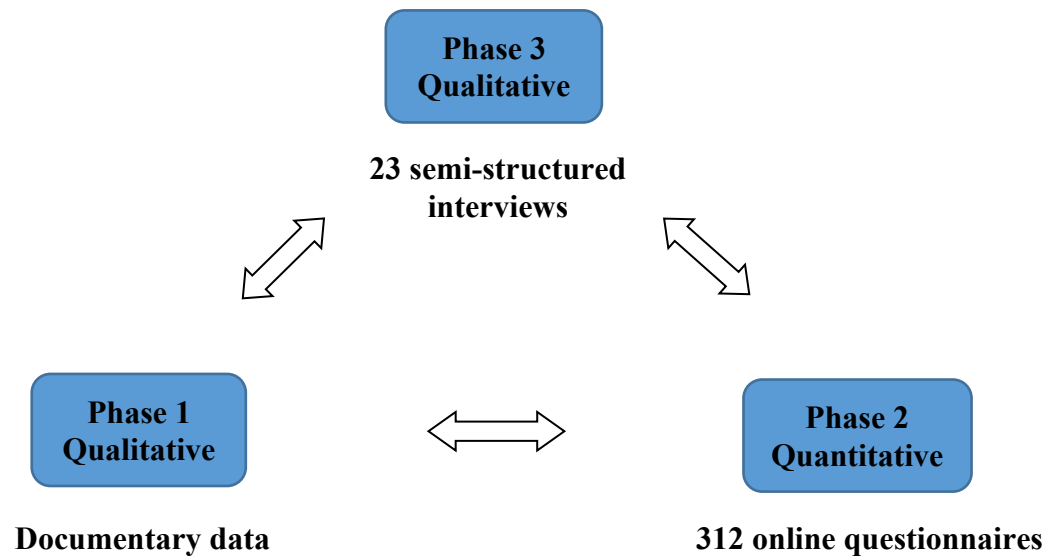
In addition, it is important to note that both frameworks have been largely built using Anglo-American work-life literature and may be problematic in helping to understand the Chinese WLB phenomenon. This research appreciates that developments may not be the same in China owing to the enormous heterogeneity in terms of context. Given that, this

research seeks to identify the limitations as well as the relevant contributions of the Anglo-American theories, frameworks and arguments used to construct the research. That is, it is a focus of the research as to whether, and to what extent, the Anglo-American - dominated work-life discourse can be applied in a different economic, institutional, social and cultural context.

1.6 An outline of the research methodology

This research adopts a mixed research design within the frame of the case study. The case study is conducted in two pharmaceutical Chinese state-owned business groups. The mixed design is adopted where three research methods are utilised respectively to maximise the opportunities for data triangulation (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). As is shown in Figure 1 below, the documentary research (primarily legal and public documentation) is firstly used to scope the national and organisational work-life related issues; an online survey is analysed to capture the initial picture of WLB, where the correlations between WLB and the relevant variables are identified. Following that, semi-structured interviews of management and employees are conducted and analysed to help to interpret the causality between variables and provide the robust standpoints of employees and management on WLB issues in the Chinese context. The arrows move back and forth within the frame of the triangle represent that the three-way data triangulation. Data triangulation helps to enrich, complement and confirm the information from different sources, which by offering different insights, assesses the data's robustness and helps to optimise research quality.

Figure 1 Integrated mixed methods design



The research was conducted in the headquarters of two state-owned business groups in the pharmaceutical sector in a south-western province where is rarely researched in HRM research. The pharmaceutical sector is a representative and appropriate case to be researched in China because it is one of the largest sectors in the Chinese economy with its business where involving planting, manufacturing, and various commercial services, and the employment and HRM practices have been modernising in recent decades with the influence of marketisation. The two companies employ more than 20,000 employees nationwide. The survey sample consists of 312 employees, representing a 62.4% response rate out of the randomly selected sample population of 500 employees. The survey sample involves a relatively representative number of participants in terms of gender and marriage. It is comprised of relatively young employees (age range between 26-35 years old) who are highly educated (with a Bachelor degree and over), and the majority of them have family care responsibilities. 23 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted from a wide range of participants, identified through generic purposive sampling. The interview sample includes predominately married managers (junior,

middle and senior) who were highly educated (with a Bachelor degree and over) and had relatively heavy caring responsibilities. It is noted that the data interpretation takes the views of interviewees from both an employee and managerial perspective, instead of directly citing quotes representative of the participant's managerial identity. This is because the interview sample is skewed towards middle and line managers who can be argued to undertake dual roles as employees and managers. They are sometimes responsible for making work-life arrangements for staff, but more often refer to their work-life experience as employees.

1.7 The research contribution

The research takes China as the empirical context to test Anglo-American models and theories and assess the extent to which Anglo-American work-life management practices are influential in China. Specifically, it examines not only employees' perceptions and experiences of WLB but also the formal and informal approaches to work-life management in the Chinese workplace. The research contributes to work-life interface and HRM literature, and the findings have implications for managerial practices and the policy agenda.

In terms of work-life research, this research empirically validates the overall-based approach (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007) and provides a contribution to understanding WLB as a complex and dynamic concept influenced by multi-layered factors. It also contributes to a critical analysis of how the meaning of work-life discourse is influenced by the context and consequently show the applicability of work-life approaches, derived from Anglo-American research, in the Chinese context. Regarding work-life management, this research unveils both the formal (WLBPPs) and informal (WLBC) approaches in the Chinese workplace, and critically analyses how these are made available and how they

are effective for employees and the organisation. In addition, the research make a contribution by testing the appropriateness of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), the frameworks constructed around the availability, usage and usefulness of WLBPPs (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Daniels and French, 2006) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) in the Chinese context.

This research also contributes to the critical analysis of wider HRM literature. On the one hand, from the strategical HRM perspective, this research highlights lack of HR strategy in relation to employees' wellbeing (Guest, 2017). On the other hand, it indicates the problem of managerial informality in terms of the wider issues including the enforcement of job regulations as well as management transparency, fairness and non-discrimination, rather than merely the field of work-life management. These two points may not be merely regarded as the Chinese issues but can be generalised too, as reflecting generic HRM issues.

In terms of methodology, this research responds to the methodological call for work-life research to adopt mixed methods, including social policy data collection, quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) approaches, to examine WLB issues in greater depth and breadth (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017; Lu and Cooper, 2015). Furthermore, the sources of the data collection broaden the research by including both the views of employees and managers. This contributes to avoid the bias that often arises from research which only understands HRM related question from the managerial lens (Cooke. 2009a).

This research identifies the scope for work-life management to improve employees' wellbeing, with positive implications for human capital and organisational development, particularly in the context of China. From a Chinese perspective, WLB needs to be seen as a part of a wider ecological balance of an organisation and society. Considering Chinese employment policy and HRM practice is underpinned by a 'top-down' institutional environment, both the policy agenda and managerial practices can be recast to improve employees' WLB in terms of strategic and practical work-life management.

1.8 The structure of the thesis

This research is organised as follows and divided into eight chapters.

Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant literature, focusing upon the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the work-life interface research an aim of identifying the critical research questions and as a basis for developing a deductive conceptual framework. This chapter begins with the debates over the contextualisation of WLB, before moving on to examine the traditional work-life models and theories. In this part of the chapter, the influence of work antecedents and intervening factors towards employees' WLB and their work behaviour are highlighted. To be more specific, two predominant antecedents, the effect of working time and workload on WLB are identified, and a range of work-life policy/practice and workplace contextual factors are considered as 'best practice' supports to secure employees' WLB and work-related behaviour (i.e. job performance).

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework used to conduct the research. The theoretical framework demonstrates how employees' WLB experiences are dominated by work demands (i.e. working hours and workload), and work resources (e.g. WLBPPs and its WLB context) and indicates how this research is underpinned by the work-life theory, the

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, et al., 2001). On the other hand, based on Budd and Mumford (2006) and Daniels and French (2006)'s frameworks about the availability, usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs; Kossek et al., (2010)'s framework about the construction of work-life balance context at the organisational and departmental level, the extent to which the WLB practices and context can work as the 'best practice' are critically examined.

As work-life issues vary according, to amongst other factors, the national context, it is argued that the Anglo-American perspective of WLB is not adequate in understanding work-life issues in China (e.g. Ling and Powell, 2001; Fleetwood, 2007a; Cooke, 2013). Considering China's unique economic, institutional and cultural characteristics provide the research ground for examining WLB issues, chapter 4 seeks to review WLB issues at the national and organisational level to contribute to an understanding of WLB issues in China. It outlines the external work-life environment at a macro level before drawing attention to the work demands and resources at the organisational level. The chapter then explores the relationship between the work demands and resources and WLB based upon the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter. Notably, an attempt is made to clarify the largely under-researched work practices and contextual support and to critically identify how these interventions might formally and informally influence employees' work-life balance and job performance. In addition, it is noted that the Chinese background can help to demonstrate the validity of theoretical framework developed in the previous chapter and identify how the study's proposed research questions can be addressed through the research design in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 offers an overview and justification of the research methodology utilised for this study and a reflexive account of the research process undertaken to address the aims and objectives of this study. To be more specific, the philosophical underpinning, methodological approaches and details of mixed research design are examined. After introducing the case study sector and organizations, the details of data collection and analysis procedures are demonstrated. The chapter finishes with an evaluation of research quality including reliability, validity, generalisation and research bias.

Chapter 6 is the first findings chapter, focusing upon the first and second research questions and their location within the overall conceptual framework. It reports and analyses Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB and their work-life experience in relation to the work demands and outcomes, drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative research data. Utilising an 'overall-based' approach (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007), the first part of the chapter explores Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB. The second part of the chapter presents findings to address the second research question about Chinese employees' work-life experience from the perspective of work demands. In particular, it explores how the employees' work-life situations are linked to their working hours and workload, and the link to questions of job performance are analysed.

Chapter 7: the second findings chapter in response to the third and fourth research questions, and their location within the overall research framework. Based upon both the quantitative and qualitative research data, it presents findings to identify and explore the formal institutionalised supports (i.e. WLBPPs) and informal contextual supports (i.e. supportive WLBC) which operate to address employees' WLB and job performance in the Chinese workplace. To be more specific, the first part of the chapter explores the

existence, availability and effect of WLBPPs on employees' WLB and job performance. The second half of the chapter identifies and explores the WLB context constructed at the organisational level (organisational culture and employer support) and departmental level (managerial and collegial supports) and the impacts on employees' WLB and job performance.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis, highlighting the main findings from the research and the contribution of the work. This chapter provides a summary, discussion and conclusion of the research. This is followed by the theoretical contributions of the research to work-life interface and HRM literature, the mixed methodological contribution, and the practical implications for managerial practices and the broader policy agenda. Following this, it highlights some potential areas for further research.

Chapter Two: Reviewing Work-Life Balance literature

2.0 Introduction

One recurrent theme in the study of work and employment is job intensification and work-life balance (WLB). WLB, therefore, has received continuous attention from academics and practitioners. Research on this theme developed primarily within western industrial economies, focusing on the work-family/life interface, but relatively little research has been conducted in the emerging economies. In order to gain an understanding of the WLB issues for Chinese employees, it is however, first necessary to undertake a general literature review, focused upon this body of Anglo-American research to review the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of research into the work-life interface with the aims of identifying the critical research questions and developing a theoretical framework.

This chapter starts with a general discussion of the labour market, employment relations and labour management in order to set the WLB debate in this context (section 2.1). This section states the importance of a wider consideration of the employment relationship and, in particular, the issue of job regulation in the context of the discussion of WLB. Then a review of research attempts to conceptualise WLB in section 2.2. WLB, as a complex and dynamic concept, does not have an accepted definition. WLB is traditionally seen as an individual's choice; but personal choices can be shaped by organisational demands and resources and, more broadly, from socially constructs emanating from the macro-environment. Considering the multi-layered impacts from individual, organisational and national factors, this research will set up a conceptual framework to scope the meaning of WLB based on an overall-based approach. To underpin the conceptual framework of WLB, section 2.3 then reviews and evaluates the core work-life models and theories. It also contributes to serving as a theoretical foundation to validate the relationships

between WLB antecedents, interventions, and outcomes. This is followed by section 2.4 which focuses on examining the general theoretical construct of WLB including its antecedents, interventions, and outcomes, and identifies the main factors related to WLB among the multi-layered factors, which contributes to scoping the theoretical framework for this research. To do so, this section reviews the work-related demands and outcomes that are associated with employees' WLB and identifies the effect of formal and informal interventions (e.g. work-life balance policies and practices, and context) on employees' WLB and work-related outcomes. This chapter finishes with a concluding section (2.5) that highlights the key issues deriving from the chapter and how these help contribute to the thesis.

2.1 Setting work-life balance issue in the context of employment relations

WLB needs to be considered in the context of the employment relationship. A criticism of HRM is that it focuses overtly on the management of employees in the organisation to the exclusion of wider political and economic factors, including an understanding of the external labour market and the political and economic factors that shape the labour market, as well as the construction of internal labour markets (Nolan, 2012). The external labour market will be influenced by the forces of supply and demand, crucially by the supply of labour, both in terms of quantity and quality, so that determines the allocation of labour power between sectors, industries, and firms (Nolan and Slater, 2003). This, in turn, will reflect wider political issues around public policy such as vocational and educational training, incentives for people to work or disincentives against not working, particularly in the face of demographic and economic change. The internal labour market refers to the deployment and utilisation of the workforce within the organisation governed by “management rules and procedures, which govern the employment relations” (Doeringer and Piore, 1971: 1–2). The internal labour market provides employers with access to

incentives and control mechanisms in terms of work allocation, pay and promotion etc. “for organisational functioning and adaptations of the external changing market and technological conditions”. (Williamson, 1975: 69).

Crucially, despite social welfare frameworks existing in many countries, most people need to seek jobs and secure employment in the labour market to secure an income, effectively becoming dependent workers, whose attraction to employers is their ability to provide productive labour. However, this wage-work bargain is unequal, which is reflected in the nature of the employment relationship. While the capitalist employment relationship is legally equal (in terms of two parties who freely agree to contract), the economic reality is that the relative power of the parties is often substantively unequal (Wedderburn, 1986). This is because the fundamental nature of the employment relationship lies in conflict and antagonism, an 'indeterminacy' to the exchange relationship in relation to an 'imbalance of power' (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 2003). Employers, and managers on their behalf, claim to have the prerogative to exercise malleability, flexibility and the right of disposition over 'their' employees. They pay attention to controlling the aspects that are central to their roles, productivity and efficiency, ensuring the paid labour is productive and achieves a considerable return on the initial capital investment (Nolan, 2012). Meanwhile, as the employment contract is also indeterminate, while workers sell their time and abilities to work, the contract cannot legally determine the quantity and quality of that work.

This creates what Kaufman (2004) has referred to as the 'labour problem' in the internal labour market - the need for managers to secure control and productivity from those they employ and can be reflected in the primary concerns of HRM relating to performance and

capability, training, recruitment and retention. This will include, for example, the construction of internal labour markets (pay and grading structures) for skilled and productive workers to secure career progression, which employers do not wish to lose, especially where the development of their productivity has been paid for by the organisation (e.g. training). Consequently, managers, as the agents of employers, will seek to secure cost-effectiveness and profitability by claiming the right to manage and implement managerial techniques to secure productive work, working together and avoiding conflict (Boxall and Purcell, 2011).

The origins of HRM can be traced back to both the Taylorist and Human Relations schools of management theory and are combined and embedded in HRM strategies, policies and procedures. Taylorism aims to adopt standardised work systems, processes and practices to fit people into jobs and instruct and supervise them for labour efficiency and productivity (Taylor, 2004). With a clear and controlled division of labour, everyone has their own duties, and with pay linked to performance (ensuring a 'fair day's pay for a fair day's work') it is argued there is no conflict in the organisation. By contrast, Human Relations theory, popularised by Mayo's work, underlines the notions of employees' intrinsic motivation, making the job fit for the employee, and designing and managing work in ways which engage and motivate people (Hersey, et al., 2007). This managerial approach seeks to reduce the conflict of employment relations by developing a sense of workplace satisfaction in the organisation of work. These approaches are unitary in their conception and assume managerial control, productivity and mutually beneficial outcomes, refuting any structural conflict in the employment relationship. They are reflected in the HRM agenda where notwithstanding claims of employee involvement and empowerment, managers organise work systems (e.g. rewards and punishment) and

utilise technology to seek to control workers and achieve effective forms of labour management.

However, Hyman (1987) argues that managerial control cannot be assumed to be universally effective and workers' resistance can emerge, reflecting the conflictual nature of the employment relationship. This is because the situation in the wider (unpredictable) labour market, the influence of law and public policy, and the individual and collective strength of workers can limit the scope for labour control. Kelly (1988) argues workers could raise their opposition to management domination and unfair control, through waves of strikes and industrial conflict, to seek justice and shift the balance of power against capital. However, while workers' opposition can be seen as active and collective (e.g. a strike) it is important that individual and passive (e.g. absenteeism) responses to managerial control can be exercised by workers, and both approaches can lead to managerial control being renegotiated and can even give rise to counter control (ibid.,; Braverman, 1974; Edwards and Scullion, 1982).

Labour management is implemented by job regulations. Clegg (1979) argues job regulation is at the centre of employment relations. The concept of job regulation refers to the mechanisms through which the rules at work are expanded, and is most clearly outlined by Flanders (1970). Flanders identified three distinct elements to job regulation: external and internal; procedural and substantive and, crucially, formal and informal. Specifically, external rules are carried out by means of external regulative content of rules, such as employment legislation and policy, rules of trade unions, and employers' associations (i.e. industry-level collective agreement). Internal rules are those regulations institutionalised within the organisation (work rules). Procedural rules refer to those

regulations that govern the behaviours of any parties (i.e. workers, managers/employers, trade unions and employer association) who are involved in employment relations. Substantive rules refer to the content of the employment relationship, such as the rates of wages and working hours or other terms and conditions of employment.

Formal and informal rules are argued to be fundamentally distinct regulatory tools in the way they make and modify employment relations. Formal rules are expressions of bureaucratic control in the sense that they are written and codify rules and procedures as in statute law, collective agreements and staff handbooks; informal rules tend to be invisible practices that are developed from managers and workers' understandings and norms over the conduct of work in a particular workplace and become accepted means of working. When understandings and norms at workplace attain more acceptance and legitimacy among employees and managers, they may be termed as custom and practice (Brown, 1972). Brown argues that custom and practice can dominate in both substantive and procedural rules of job regulation. It should be noted that, in most cases, the generation and maintaining of custom and practice accords with the employer's interests and are unilaterally regulated by management.

Whilst the state, trade union and the employer formalise the written rules at the organisational level, work practices may differ significantly (Tyson, 1995). Brown (1992: 191) argues that there is a 'space' for variation in the means of control that are adopted in the workplace. Moreover, the exercise of managerial informality is, in relation to a complex social process, any formal and well-planned strategies which may be altered by line managers who are responsible for their implementation, or informal re-negotiation

between managers and employees on an ad hoc basis (Brown, 1972; Delbridge and Lowe, 1997).

In addition, it is noted that while the presence and impact of informality were identified in classic studies of employment relations as early as four decades ago, these are largely missing from current debates in HRM. The literature review of this research will restate this argument by discussing and exploring management's formal application of HRM policy and practice.

The brief review of employment relations literature above contributes to understanding WLB as a labour issue through the following points:

- An understanding of WLB needs to consider the wider national background, in particular, relative to the economic, legislative, and political context.
- WLB must be seen as part of the wider research into labour markets and the employment contract.
- As part of HRM, managing employees' WLB seeks to address the tensions between the need to secure productive labour, against the need to secure and retain labour supply.
- In work-life management practices, formal and informal approaches which rule at work (job regulation) can be made and enforced, and it is important to acknowledge the potentially significant role of informal job regulation in the discussion of WLB.

Based upon the WLB and HRM literature, the following literature review will conceptualise WLB holistically, by particularly considering the national and organisational contexts, and expand the four arguments above accordingly.

2.2 The conceptualisation and contextualisation of work-life balance

2.2.1 The meanings of “work”, “life” and “balance” within work-life balance

The concept of WLB has received considerable attention and discussion in the academic and practical discourse relating to organisations, trades unions, managers and employees across all levels and industries (De Cieri and Santos, 2009; Gregory and Milner 2009). The concept of WLB has undergone progressive evolution. The predecessor, ‘work-family’ studies were critiqued for only considering the conflicted connections between paid work and family life, which was heavily focused on a certain sub-population, namely women with dependent children. However, this concept has become less prevalent in the contemporary workforce. Under the influences of globalisation, technology and demographic changes, the scope and boundary of work and life have blurred and become more complicated: individuals experience more varied and intricate work-life experiences including conflict, enrichment and integration. This makes the society, organisations, researchers, and employees aware that both male and female employees and their experiences and responsibilities outside of work, need to be considered. Hence, the conceptualisation of the subject transferred from the ‘work-family’ to ‘work-life’ in the 1990s.

WLB has been developing as a holistic and inclusive concept that involves a wide range of the workforce, regardless of gender or life course status (Bardoel, 2016). On the one hand, the focus has been transferred from a gendered into a comprehensive discourse that embraces all individuals and includes whichever the life stage they are in (single, married,

separated, etc.). On the other hand, the scope of work and the non-work domain is broadening and has become more obscure. As Hyman et al., (2003) and Eby et al. (2005) argue, work can be initially defined as paid employment and then it evolves to embrace the extra work-related activities, such as business trips, work commute and work socialising etc.

Under the concept of WLB, life refers to wide domains outside of work (Guest, 2002b). It consists of not only the critical dimension 'family', involving family care and domestic work but also the 'non-work' including personal leisure and resting, community involvement or social life (Sánchez-Vidal et al.,2012). Researchers have argued, in particular, those pressures have increased dramatically on individuals, with the tension and complexity in household life exacerbated when both the children and elderly parents of a working couple require care (Hyman et al., 2003; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2012).

'Balance' is a metaphor related to the physical and psychological, concerning 'stability of body or mind' (Guest, 2002b), where health, mental and emotional steadiness is demonstrated. However, the 'steadiness' can be highly problematic because the balance can vary significantly between different individuals based on specific circumstances (Hyman and Summers, 2004). Different people are inclined to experience a different status of WLB based upon subjective and objective, internal and external measurements (Guest, 2002b). While the overall meaning of WLB seems to be well-understood, there is little consensus on a precise definition of WLB among researchers (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011). Personal subjective heterogeneity and objective environmental changes inevitably enhance the difficulty in defining WLB abstractly and accurately. This raises another issue; without a well-developed conceptualisation, it is problematic to create

adequate recommendations for WLB interventions. Guest articulates (2002b:264) the conceptualisation dilemma stating “many studies of WLB are conveniently and perhaps inevitably imprecise in specifying what they mean. In support, it is arguable that many studies focus on the subjective experience of imbalance and subjective attribution of causes and therefore imposing a definition would be unhelpfully restrictive.”

The problem of conceptualisation reflects the historical evolution of work-life interference. This research will adopt overall-based approaches to conceptualise. Under the overall perspective, balance is broader than an individual’s experiences of conflict and enrichment in perspectives. The focus then shifts from the work-life interference to work-life priority (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011) and the social interaction in context (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007). The following section outlines the problems of defining and conceptualising WLB, before exploring the overall-based approach.

2.2.2 The conceptualisation of Work-life balance

Work-life balance has not been consistently defined, despite the term’s widespread use in the work-family/life research (Carlson et al., 2006). The representative definitions of work-family/life balance are summarised in Table 1 (below). These can be classified and analysed by two main conceptualising approaches: a component-based and an overall-based approach (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007).

The component-based approach offers a way to understand WLB through the different components involved in the work-life relationship (Rantanen et al., 2011). For example, conflict and enrichment can be representative components as well as distinctive dimensions in understanding WLB (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Furthermore, some researchers measure WFC from a components-based

perspective. Grzywacz and Marks (2000) conceptualised work and non-work as the integration of positive and negative ‘spillover’. Fisher-McAuley et al.’s, (2003) explain that WLB is how one role negatively or positively affects individuals’ work-life experiences and outcomes in the other role. Frone (2003) views work-family balance (WFB) as an equivalent to the absence of work-family conflict and the presence of work-life facilitation. These approaches suggest that the work-life relationship can be constituted from positive and negative aspects.

Table 1 The representative definitions of work-family/life balance

Definitions	Selected sources
Work-family/life balance is viewed as the absence of work-family conflict (WFC) where the WFC is defined as “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect”.	Greenhaus and Beutell (1985: 77)
Work-family balance is an integration of positive and negative ‘spillover’ between work and life.	Grzywacz and Marks (2000)
Work-life balance refers to work and non-work roles that explain how experiences in one role negatively or positively affect experiences and outcomes in the other.	Fisher-McAuley, et al., (2003)
Work-life balance is “low levels of inter-role conflict and high levels of inter-role facilitation.”	Frone (2003: 45)
Work-family balance is “the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in—an equally satisfied with—his or her work role and family role.”	Greenhaus et al. (2003: 513)
Work-life balance highlights an individual’s perceptions that “work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in line with an individual’ current life priorities”.	Kalliath and Brough (2008:326)
“Work-family balance as an overall appraisal of the extent to which individuals’ effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are consistent with their life values at a given point in time.”	Greenhaus and Allen (2011:174)
Work-family balance is the “accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains.”	Grzywacz and Carlson (2007: 458)

The component-based approach offers a way to understand WLB through the different components involved in the work-life relationship (Rantanen et al., 2011). For example, conflict and enrichment can be representative components as well as distinctive

dimensions in understanding WLB (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Furthermore, some researchers measure WFC from a components-based perspective. Grzywacz and Marks (2000) conceptualised work and non-work as the integration of positive and negative 'spillover'. Fisher-McAuley et al.'s, (2003) explain that WLB is how one role negatively or positively affects individuals' work-life experiences and outcomes in the other role. Frone (2003) views work-family balance (WFB) as an equivalent to the absence of work-family conflict and the presence of work-life facilitation. These approaches suggest that the work-life relationship can be constituted from positive and negative aspects.

However, the component-based conceptualisation is problematic, especially when examining WLB relating to its antecedents and consequences. Grzywacz and Carlson (2007:463) argue that "work-family conflict and work-family enrichment occasionally share antecedents that have similar rather than opposite effects". For example, fewer working hours tend to lead to reduced work-life conflict but may also lead to weaker enrichment due to less pay or career development opportunities. Or a complex workload can bring work-life conflict but perhaps enhance job enrichment through acquiring new skill-learning and problem-solving capabilities. In this respect, the puzzle emerges if an organisation expects to improve its employees' WLB by enhancing enrichment through increasing work demands, but as a result, it increases work-life conflict. Is this work-life balance or imbalance? Accordingly, Carlson et al. (2006) argue work-family balance is more than the absence of conflict and the presence of enrichment; it is distinct from more traditional work-family interface constructs.

Since the balance between work and life may be problematic to separate into elements, researchers have considered an overall-based approach. The starting point for this approach is that a person generally assesses their work-life experiences based on satisfaction and completeness without distinguishing components and direction (Voydanoff, 2005; Rantanen et al., 2011). Greenhaus et al. (2003: 513) define WFB as “the equal extent to which an individual is engaged and satisfied with his or her multiple roles, and they posit a balance may be reached and enhanced when there is an overall sense of ‘time balance, involvement balance, and satisfaction balance’”. There is no emphasis on the extent to which work shapes life or life affects work. Rather, attention is attached to an individual’s ability to engage in and fulfil multiple role participation in work and family domains. However, it is problematic to specify how much time/involvement spent in work and life can be deemed as equivalent. It seems to be difficult to weigh as equal input and output in terms of how well work-related time and involvement satisfy family-related demands (or vice versa) (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011; Voydanoff, 2005).

Greenhaus and Allen (2011) further argue the perspective of Greenhaus et al. (2003) appears to ignore individual priorities with respect to a particular role or roles they value. The balance may not be determined by the engagement and satisfaction derived from a role, but by whether the role(s) is valued by the individual. Given that, they propose “work-family balance as an overall appraisal of the extent to which individuals’ effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are consistent with their life values at a given point in time” (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011:174). This definition highlights the role salience in life span by emphasising “a balanced individual is highly effective and satisfied in a role or roles that are of highest priority.” (ibid.). Drawing on the

classification of life-role priority developed by Greenhaus and Allen (2011) identify three important life priorities related to the work-life/family interface: career-focused, family-focused and career-and-family focused.

Similarly, Kalliath and Brough (2008) conceptualise WLB from an individual's current life priorities. Individuals who perform multiple roles allocate the resources provided by work and life to meet the corresponding demands and effectively participate in the roles concerned and valued (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007). For example, an employee's work-life priority is often in direct response to a critical event at work (e.g. new promotion) and home domain (e.g. the arrival of a new baby). In this respect, an individual's priority appears a personal choice, but it will be shaped by the demands and resources from the family, organisation and even society. To clarify this, it is now appropriate to focus on contextualising WLB.

2.2.3 The contextualisation of work-life balance

Individuals' work-life priorities are argued to be dynamic reflecting social-demographics such as family structure, marital and parental status and household structure (Brummelhuis and Lippe, 2010), and change and respond to major life events and transitions (Grzywacz and Marks, 2000). For example, young graduates tend to be more career-focused before establishing their own family due to fewer demands to provide care. With changing family demands over time, the caring responsibility may affect work-life priorities, as childcare demands quantitatively and qualitatively require different types of resources. People may transition from being focused on their career to spending time on childcare, but they may work harder to afford childcare expense. With an ageing population, increasing elderly care responsibilities may delay retirement to ensure financial and health care coverage (Dentinger and Clarkberg, 2002).

Furthermore, work and career development may also influence the individual's priorities. The employee encountering a career bottle-necked or being met with a glass-ceiling may choose to prioritise the family; the employee able to progress his or her career may be further motivated to focus on career development. Interestingly, the shift in focus between the two domains often intertwines and interplays negatively and positively and may further shape (and reinforce) an individual's priority. This echoes Greenhaus and Allen's (2011) definition, which states balance is based on employees' work-life priorities, but it is important to highlight that these priorities are shaped within a particular work and home context (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007).

Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) capture the dynamic realities of WLB transitions between work-life focus which mostly arise from socio-demographic changes related to the career and family life. Therefore, they define WLB as "accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains" (2007:458). It brings the concept of WLB from the individual into the social field and enables researchers to theorise the extent to which the social interaction at work and in the home domain impact upon an individual's WLB. Given that, this research will focus on conceptualising the WLB in this broader way, accepting Grzywacz and Carlson's argument that "this type of layering is essential for developing rich theories of work and family and for informing the design and implementation of effective interventions within organisations (2007: 459)."

Research suggests that work demands and resources have received greater attention when examining individuals' work-life perceptions and experience (Voydanoff, 2005). Compared to the family sphere, work demands and resources at the organisational level

are more likely to facilitate or hinder employees' efforts to fulfil work and personal responsibilities and therefore impact their WLB. As Lewis et al., (2007) argue although most employees might think they can make choices to arrange their work and life as they will, choices are socially embedded and are often constrained not only by household 'choice', but also the changing nature of work.

The changing nature of work can be attributed to internal labour management control and external environment dynamics. Work-Life management as a job regulation contributes to dealing with WLB issues in formal and informal approaches. As is discussed in section 2.1, formal regulations can originate from law, policy and in collective agreements, such as family-friendly policies stipulated by the state and government, and company initiatives (e.g employee assistance schemes) regulated within organisational policy and practices. Informal regulations are mainly derived from the development of custom and practice that establish supportive WLB norms in a particular workplace. An example would be that managers can grant temporal flexibility and leave if employees need to deal with a personal emergency. Employees may also have different priorities and pursue their own informal rules. While the informal rules may satisfy employees and managers in a more efficient and flexible manner, in terms of the inequality and indeterminacy of employment relations, the management has the power to control and manage employees' WLB through a range of substantive and procedural rules in terms of work time, intensity, flexibility, and benefits. By contrast, employees are rather weaker in negotiating work-life rights and benefits. Therefore, work demands and resources given by the management can heavily facilitate or hinder employees' efforts to fulfil work and personal responsibilities. Employees' work-life perceptions and experiences are impacted by the

extent that their work-life needs are effectively addressed by the formal and informal policies and practices embodied in their managers, directly and indirectly (ibid.).

More broadly, people's perceptions and choices are also shaped by the external environment dynamics. The national context fundamentally influences both employees' WLB perceptions and situations (Poelmans, 2005). The increasing importance of WLB within the policy arena is largely driven by economic development, labour market (re)configuration, demographic and social-cultural changes such as higher levels of female labour market participation as well as the shift to dual-earner households and employees' desire to achieve improved quality of life (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). WLB, therefore, becomes a socially-constructed concept embedded in the national societal environment and varying according to political, economic, cultural, and social conditions and change in a given period (Lewis and Beauregard, 2018; Lewis et al., 2007). The following part focuses on Britain during the period of economic crisis and austerity as an example of the importance of contextualising WLB.

WLB has become increasingly prominent in public policy since the 1990s in the UK, for reasons linked to work intensification and demographic shifts (Daniels and French, 2006). The UK government promoted a lightly regulated framework, the 'WLB Campaign' in 2000 which encouraged employers voluntarily to introduce the friendly work-family practices to improve their employees' WLB while maintaining their business goals. This campaign was also backed up legally with family-friendly legislation – strengthening maternity and paternity rights and the right to request flexible working. As a result, this institutionalised approach was welcomed by employers, and the Government also considered this approach to be successful (Hyman and Summers, 2004). Although

empirical research still found many employees continued to face difficulties in reconciling their work and domestic responsibilities due to the unevenness of adoption and the lack of formalisation of policies, as well as the business profitability-driven nature of the campaign (e.g. *ibid.*; Lewis, 2007), the minimally institutionalised work-life context was argued to have had a positive and beneficial influence on employees' WLB (Beauregard and Henry, 2009).

However, since 2008, the impact of the recession and austerity policies has created enormous challenges for individuals seeking a meaningful WLB (Gregory et al., 2013). Negative economic growth was recorded in 2008, 2011 and 2012 in the UK. Given this severe contraction of business activity, the fall in employment was relatively small, although substantial job losses hit the private sector in 2008-2009 and the public sector after 2010 (*ibid.*). Many organisations responded to the crisis by cutting labour costs, either by reducing recruitment, implementing pay cuts, restructuring, downsizing, or instituting layoffs (Iverson and Zatzick, 2011). The (remaining) employees, therefore, faced increased working hours, work intensification, job insecurity, and stress, and reduced pay, benefits, training and development opportunities regardless of WLB (McDonnell and Burgess, 2013). Self-reported WLB declined from 61 % at the end of 2012 to 56 % in the first quarter of 2013 as a result of the recession and economic downturn (CIPD, 2013).

Meanwhile, work-life programmes are no longer an organisational priority when unemployment rates are high during an economic recession (Lu and Antoniou, 2013). Employers tend to reduce the employment cost 'by fundamentally reforming the way we work' (Spurr cited in Guardian, 2014) especially with the mediation of development and

application of technology and communication. For example, temporal work flexibility is often implemented to meet business demands, with very little consideration towards employees (Hyman and Summers, 2004); While maternity and paternity support looks generous, it is argued to be unhelpful in reality, because the rates of leave pay are limited under cost-saving concerns (Van et al., 2013). Consequently, in a situation where organisations adapt to the economic recession and control the costs of employment, the so-called ‘support’ that helps employee survive through the recession is accompanied by a greater intensification of work (Gregory et al., 2013).

Additionally, WLB is a Western construct and although an increasing literature is emerging from research undertaken in non-western and emerging economies (e.g. Lu and Cooper, 2015), the majority of the WLB research literature remains focused on Anglo-American contexts and largely neglects the potential cultural -sensitivity of the WLB concept (Powell et al., 2009). Apart from the interpretation of WLB in diverse economic and societal contexts, cultural values and norms can ‘invisibly’ shape an individual's expectations and perceptions towards WLB. The cross-culture work-life research often discusses cultural sensitivity based upon Hofstede's (1980) cultural identifications such as individualism-collectivism or gender egalitarianism. For example, it is argued that for individuals in many eastern Asian collectivistic societies, work tends to be viewed as a way of supporting and advancing the family; conflict between these two domains is perceived as an unavoidable byproduct of promoting the family's financial stability. Consequently, buffered by the cultural values, work-life conflict is less severe compared to the individualistic western country. (Lu et al., 2010; Spector et al., 2007). This argument and more details related to the cultural impact on WLB will be elaborated in Chapter 4.

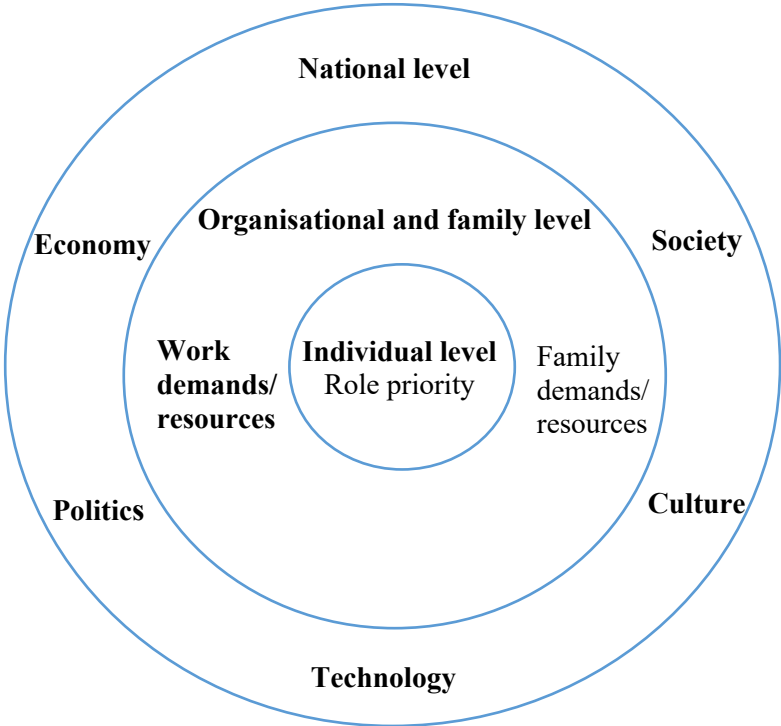
In summary, it is essential for research to reflect on the complexity of WLB and the layers of context where they are rooted. Özbilgin et al. (2011: 177) argue that the “social and historical context has more explanatory power in work-life dynamics than the micro-individual level of explanations.” Therefore, work-life research needs to consider both the different levels and factors that can influence WLB as well as their interactions (Lu and Cooper, 2015; Ollier-Malaterre, 2017). As the national context is heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, this research intends to respond to this call and strives to advance the WLB concept in the world largest labour market but under-studied context, China. The detailed scoping of the Chinese national context will be presented in chapter 4.

2.2.4 The conceptual framework of Work-life balance

To conclude the previous sections, WLB is a complex and dynamic concept which needs to be understood through a conceptual framework that incorporates factors at the individual, family, organisational and national level (see Figure 2 above). This study suggests that the adoption of an overall-based approach to conceptualise WLB is the most appropriate as it highlights how an individuals’ fulfilment of role priority can be located within a particular context. Although no specific definition will be adopted or refined from literature, as indicated by Greenhaus and Allen (2011) as well as Grzywacz and Carlson’s (2007) conceptualisation, this research highlights WLB as constructed by individuals’ work-life priority and contextual influences across the work and life domain, especially organisational demands and resources, which is further entangled and impacted by the external macro-environment. The review of extant literature offers a basic theoretical starting point to understand WLB in an under-documented context (Greenhaus and Allen, 2011), such as China. Practically, adopting an overall-based approach is conducive to improving the understanding and effectiveness of organisational practices

on employees' work-life issues. As Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) suggest, WLB as the core function of Human Resource development may be a strong lever for promoting individual and organisational effectiveness. The next section will review the models and theories of WLB to enhance the comprehension of the WLB concept and underpin the conceptual framework in depth.

Figure 2 The conceptual framework of Work-life balance



2.3 The model and theory of WLB

WLB research can be related to the specific methods by which work, and non-work roles bi-directionally interact with one another, such as segmentation (Blood and Wolfe, 1960), spillover (Katz-kahn, 1978), compensation (Lambert, 1990), conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985), enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006) and integration (Lewis and Cooper, 2005); and by the type of work-life demands and resources at individual, organisational, family and, societal level (Duxbury and Higgins, 2003). The following section will review and evaluate the core work-life theories to help underpin this study.

2.3.1 Traditional models: segmentation, compensation, spillover and conflict

The earliest model to refine the work-life interface is a segmentation model that highlights the absolute separation of work and life. The segmentation is based on geography (workplace and location of the home) and gender (male breadwinner and housewife). Blood and Wolfe (1960) regarded work-life segmentation as a natural progression that generally applied to blue-collar employees. This perspective, it was argued, provided the possibility of theoretical explanation, and such a standard, featuring permanent male employment and a gendered division of labour can still exist in Fordist manufacturing. However, as labour markets and the nature of work have changed, this physical segmentation becomes less possible. For example, working time is difficult to fix in the global 24-7 marketplace; working time and location can be everywhere mediated by information and communication technology (ICT). Consequently, people's paid work, and personal lives have become increasingly blurred (Lewis and Cooper, 2005).

Afterwards, Lambert (1990) proposed the compensation model that one sphere makes up for any lacking in the other sphere. Namely, individuals who are unsatisfied in work may still experience balance by engaging with compensatory behaviours from their personal life domain, or vice versa. A typical example is an instrumental compensation (Guest, 2002a) that describes the material-driven employees who seek to maximise earnings to allow purchasing items for a better life whereby they tolerate demanding work. In this regard, financial rewards and job security can be viewed as balance indicators to offset time-based and strain-based conflict from work to life, which helps to strike the psychological balance. Despite this, Naithani (2010) argues, it is not necessarily a compensatory balance because material resources from work do not always offset the time and psychological loss in the personal domain.

Furthermore, the emergence of the spillover model (Staines, 1980; Lambert, 1990) substantially extends and deepens the discussion of WLB. The focus of this perspective is that although work and non-work domains are independent with precise boundaries, individuals' roles in their work and personal life can mutually intermingle either positively or negatively, spilling over from one to the other domain, and influence individuals' well-being and effective functioning. For instance, employees tend to experience conflict when their work demands are interrelated with non-work issues. For that reason, the emotions, attitudes, skills and behaviours of employees derived from one domain may visibly and invisibly impact on to the other domain (Clark, 2000). The positive and negative spillovers respectively indicate the benefits and shortcomings of the interdependent relationship between work and non-work domains. In terms of work scope, for example, Hyman et al. (2003) conducted empirical research on negative spillover from work to life. They find work-life spillover through two ways: tangible means such as extended hours and intangible ways such as exhaustion and stress. Jennings and McDougald (2007) further argue that positive and negative spillovers may coexist. For instance, the potential returns (e.g. higher salary or better benefits) as a result of withstanding tangible long hours and intangible stress, can offer opportunities for personal development and provide better material foundations for their quality of life.

Subsequently, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) develop the most influential conflict model, based upon the scarcity hypothesis (Goode, 1960). They propose that an individual possesses limited resources (such as time, effort, or physical and emotional energy) that can be finitely allocated to different domains. The work-family conflict has been widely discussed as the fundamental paradigm and construct in the work-family/life research. Work-family conflict is referred to "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures

from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some aspect (Greenhaus and Beutell (1985: 77)”. This conflict model is distinguished as operating in two-directions, work-to-family conflict (WFC) and family-to-work conflict (FWC), meaning that conflict arises if demands required for resources in one domain (e.g. work) are high(er), leaving fewer resources available for meeting demands in other domains (family). The bidirectional construct highlights the incompatibility of multiple roles in work and family due to the different norms and responsibilities (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). The spillover mechanism helps explain this: different work and family norms and responsibilities can exert adverse inference and spillover from one domain to the other, causing WFC in both directions. Interpreting this in terms of the demands and resources perspective, conflict occurs between domains as a result of that increase (overloading) of demands and insufficient allocation (availability) of resources to allow the fulfilment of different role responsibilities in the different domains.

Specifically, WFC is categorised into three types of conflicts: time-based; strain-based; and behaviour-based (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). It is suggested that WFC arises if there is insufficient time to perform the required tasks in one domain (e.g. work); if the inherent strains or stressors in one role affect the ability to perform in the other; or if there is the incompatibility between the behavioural norms expected across the spheres (Zedeck and Moiser, 1990). In researching the conflict dimension, Greenhaus and Buetell (1985) and Frone et al. (1997b) examine and identify a more overarching framework, covering the antecedents and outcomes of work-family conflict and distinguishing between work to family (W-to-F) and family to work (F-to-W) causality. Although both directions show adverse effects on employees’ work and life, an individual perceives more resources (e.g. flexibility, support.) to adjust their demands as a family member rather than an employee,

making the influence of work-to-life conflict central for employees. Due to the rigid boundary of work, work demands are strongly related to an individual's WLB (Bryon, 2005).

2.3.2 Recent theoretical developments: enrichment and integration

The notion of work dominating life 'negatively' is still the prevailing focus of research in a situation of increasingly demanding work and dynamic family demands. However, inspired by the positive psychology perspective, role expansion theory posits that multiple roles participation can generate resources that offer benefits for individuals and organisations (Nordenmark, 2004). Those highlighting the positive dimension of role interaction argue that an individual's experiences in one role can affect the other role in a positive way (Van Steenbergen and Ellemers, 2009). As 'positive' work-life studies have been growing (Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 2002), the relationship of work and life are labeled by a variety of terms such as positive spillover (Hanson and Hammer, 2006), facilitation (Wayne et al. 2007), enhancement (Ruderman et al. 2002), and enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Work-family enrichment (WFE) has gained wide attention and discussion in research as the counterpart of work-life conflict. Greenhaus and Powell (2006: 73) define WFE as "the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role." They demonstrate that employees can accumulate various resources to contribute to work-family enrichment in both directions. The resources could include material resources, work flexibility, psychological and physical resources, skills and perspectives, and social-capital resources. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) suggest that these work resources have a positive effect on an individual's life domain through direct (instrumental) and indirect (affective) paths. An example of a direct path could be that the salary paid from work role helps to meet the non-work demands (e.g., pays for childcare). In terms of an indirect path, an example could be a

coordinated and harmonious work environment generates a positive emotion (e.g., sense of satisfaction), which not only benefits work performance but also positively spills over to the employee's non-work domain indirectly. Work-life conflict and enrichment have developed to be the main frameworks to analyse individuals' work-life issues both in theoretical and empirical research.

Driven by the external forces, the work-life relationship becomes so complex that it cannot be easily classified into the elements of segmentation, conflict or enrichment. In the context of contemporary work, many people are now working longer and more intensively than ever. Working time is extended and unpredictable in the global 24/7 services, space and distance are compressed by information and communication technology (ICT), the temporal and spatial boundaries between paid work, and personal life have become increasingly blurred. In such a situation, Lewis and Cooper (2005) argue that work-personal life integration or harmonisation is a more appropriate way to describe the work-life relationship. It refers to the integration of paid work and personal lives rather than separating different domains and captures the potential synergies between many different parts of life. The rise of integration critiques the false dichotomy of work and life and highlights the connection between work and personal life (especially family) from the overall-based rather than component-based perspective. With integration, people's perceptions of balance result from feeling an overall sense of satisfaction and experiencing minimal levels of conflict (Valcour and Hunter, 2005; Sirgyl and Lee, 2018).

Nevertheless, this term used can be problematic. Lewis and Cooper (2005) argue that integration implies paid work and personal life must be integrated and reconciled for balance in self-demands and time. It seems to rule out the situation that some people

reconcile their work and life demands by separating their work and family time. For instance, people would like to 'work hard, play hard' by separating their time. Although it seems to be difficult to do so in the ever-changing business world and competitive labour market, it is the case that work-life integration does not refer to a complete reconciliation, and there may be a separation involved as a sub-strategy for overall work-life satisfaction.

In summary, these various theoretical models and theories echo the two central ways of conceptualising WLB (i.e. component-based and overall-based) and underpin the conceptual framework of WLB. Notably, they contribute to understanding individuals' choices and constraints when facing work-life conflict and identify potential interventions and support at the organisational level. It is argued that employers need to consider both employees' work-life perceptions and expectations, as well as external social, political and legal demands when developing HRM strategies and practices (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). In turn, the conceptual framework we raised may serve as a critical foundation to validate current theoretical models describing the relationships between common WLB antecedents, interventions, and outcomes (Kalliath and Brough, 2008). Further, to scrutinise the complex and dynamic nature of the work-life interface, work-life research focuses on examining the work antecedents, and outcomes influencing employees' WLB and examine the relevance of, and potential for, effective HR policies and a supportive work environment in addressing WLB issues. Therefore, the next section reviews the construct of WLB including the antecedents, outcomes and interventions operating at several levels, but especially at the organisational level.

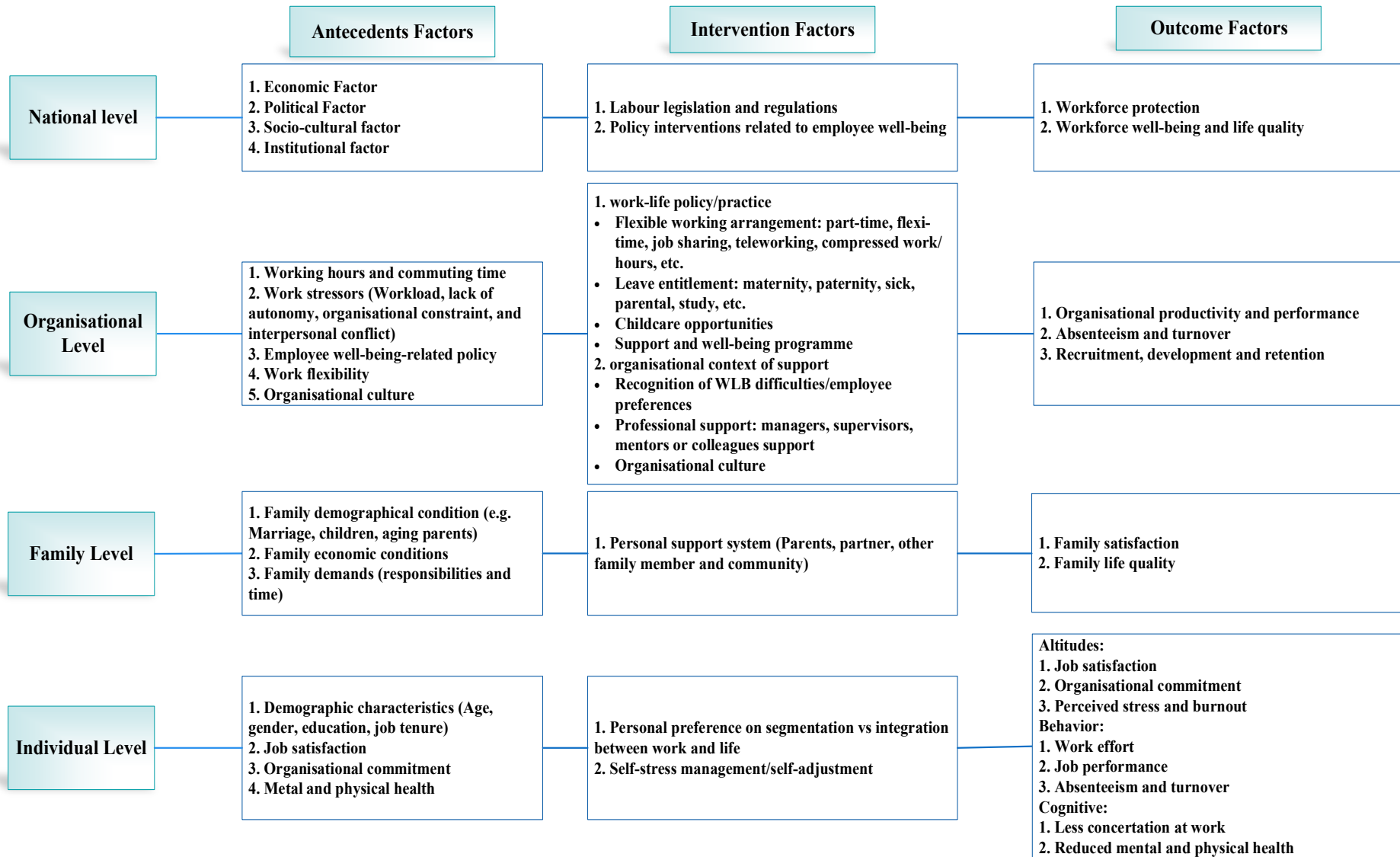
2.4 General construct of WLB

2.4.1 The overview of Work-life balance related factors

WLB is a multifaceted concept that has been extensively studied at the national, organizational, familial and individual levels, incorporating a multitude of factors in terms of antecedents, interventions and work-related outcomes, as is summarised in Figure 3 below (e.g. Greenhaus and Allen, 2011; Lu and Cooper, 2015; Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017).

Ollier-Malaterre et al., (2013) emphasised the importance of the national context to develop work-life research, in particular, country-level economic, societal, institutional and cultural influences on people's work and life. These macro-level factors externally impact (either promote or limit) a range of meso-level work-life variables at the organisational level (ibid.). Examples include work-life management approaches, which can be promoted by the advocacy of national friendly-family policies and culture or marginalised by economic austerity. Both the macro- and meso-level components are closely linked to the individual's personal and familial issues at the micro-level issues (Bardoel and DeCieri, 2014), including the overall perceptions and experiences of WLB, their expectations regarding work-life support, and awareness and use of work-life policies.

Figure 3 The construct of Work-life/family balance factors (summarised by the author)



As personal and family heterogeneity in the home (private) sphere lies beyond an organisations' control (Keeney et al., 2013), work-life research and concerns in HRM mainly focus on employees' work-to-life interference. The central topic is how work demands influence employees' WLB and to what extent their WLB impacts upon their organisational behaviour, and how practical HR interventions and organisational support affect employees' WLB (Lewis et al., 2007; Fleetwood, 2007a; Beauregard and Henry, 2009). This research aims to enable employers and managers to realise the significance and value of WLB for employees and the organisation and promotes effective work-life management at the organisational level (e.g. Lewis et al., 2007; Bloom et al., 2009). Research findings are consistent in mainly identifying the inclusion of relationships between key work-related antecedents (e.g. working hours, workload) and intervening factors (e.g. work-life practice and support) and individuals' WLB and to be connected with work-related outcomes, namely performance (Bansal and Roth, 2000; Brough et al., 2014; Timms et al., 2015).

2.4.2 Work-related demands, WLB, and Work-related outcomes

Both Anglo-American and Chinese studies have found that work-related factors are more dominant than family-related factors leading to WLB (e.g. Guest, 2002a; Xiao and Cooke, 2012). From the outcome-oriented perspective, the imbalance is closely related to employees' work attitudes and behaviours, which could lead organisations to focus on and manage their employees' work-life issues. This section will focus on the work-related demands that influence WLB and employees' behaviour to examine the employees' WLB.

As Eby, et al. (2005) and Byron (2005) note, research into WLB antecedents mainly focuses on demands that are classified into three categories: work-related, non-work-related, and demographic or personal factors. Work-related factors refer to the demands

and effects of the job and workplace factors, such as job involvement and hours spent at work. Non-work factors mainly include family demands such as the household division of labour, dependent care and age of youngest child. Demographic or individual factors include age, gender, education, occupation and social status, coping style and skills, and personality. Work-related factors are associated with the work-to-life balance, and non-work factors are related to life-to-work balance.

It is argued that of the three categories work-related factors are the dominant ones in influencing employees' work-life experience, as employee's work and life options are largely limited by work demands (Guest, 2002a; Bryon, 2005). Demanding work-related issues impact employees' WLB in various ways, notably hours spent at and on work and extra workloads. Both theoretical approaches and empirical evidence show the direct negative effect of the amount of time spent at work and workload on WLB (e.g., Frone et al., 1997a; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Excessive working hours and workload squeeze employees' time and energy to spend on life commitments, and negatively spillover into the life domain, damaging employees' WLB. Conversely, employees who work standardised or pre-planned working patterns may be more associated with good time management and restored family resources.

In an era of fierce global competition and following the worldwide economic recession, the dynamic changes in the employment, such as layoffs, early retirement, and temporary employment create further challenges to a WLB (Gregory et al., 2013). For instance, the emerging High-Performance Work systems are argued to develop employees' human capital which leads to personal control and efficacy (Voydanoff, 2005). However, these systems coupled with greater work demands and stress may damage employees' efficacy

and their WLB (White et al., 2003). While the commitment toward WLB may be initially bundled with high-performance work practices, employers/managers fail to uphold the commitment in its practical adoption (Heywood et al. 2010). Afraid of pay cuts or losing a job, most employees work longer and harder than before, which leads to increased work and life imbalance (Lu, 2016). Some work flexibility in terms of place and time of work has become available and feasible with the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), enabling work arrangements to be more accommodating of diverse personal needs and lifestyles. However, work boundaries are blurred in the form of the unpredictable extensions, informal overtime and ‘take-work-home’ which invisibly extends the contractual hours (Hyman et al., 2005). These phenomena are particularly relevant among the group of professional, skilled and technical employees in today’s knowledge economy. The autonomy they possess to shape their workload appears insufficient to challenge work intensification with the application of ‘high commitment’, ‘high performance’ management approaches (White et al., 2003; Heywood et al., 2010; French 2014). In this regard, such contemporary HRM systems pursued to address greater market pressures extend the work demands on a skilled workforce and challenge employees’ WLB.

Work-related outcomes are extensively discussed as a result of work-life imbalance. In the meta-analysis of work-life research, Allen et al. (2000) summarised plenty of theoretical and empirical evidence outlining the conflict dimension and the negative attitudinal and behavioural consequences of work-life imbalance. Bellavia and Frone (2005) subsequently categorise these outcomes into three types including work-related, family-related, and domain-unspecific outcomes (e.g. stress and health problems) and Amstad et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis to certify the validity of the classification.

To be more specific, poor WLB negatively contributes to work attitudes (e.g. poor job satisfaction and organisational commitment, emotional exhaustion and job burnout – see Frone et al., 1997a), behaviours (e.g. serious work mistakes, work-related illness, increasing turnover intention - see. Kossek and Ozeki, 1998; Allen et al., 2000), decreased job performance (Allen et al., 2000; Netemeyer, et al., 2005) and increased absenteeism (Thomas and Ganster, 1995). The conservation-of-resources (COR) theory established by Hobfoll (1989) offers an appropriate theoretical interpretation to explain why work-life imbalance may lead to such harmful work outcomes. Individuals are motivated to acquire and protect personal resources such as time and energy. An actual loss of, or threat to resources (e.g. work demands) may generate stress, and therefore individuals experience a work-life imbalance, which may, in turn, demotivate them to maintain and improve positive attitudes and behaviour in both domains, especially the one from which the resources are lost.

Even though the linkage between work-life imbalance and employee's attitudes has been mostly well-documented, the findings between work-life imbalance and behaviour-related outcomes can be seen to be inadequate. In particular, the direct link between WLB and job performance is rarely researched. Kim (2014) indicates that WLB has the potential to result in increased performance, but the relationship is indirect and mediated by attitudinal factors such as high job satisfaction or organisational commitment. Namely, the experience of psychological well-being helps employees concentrate on their work, resulting in better performance. Beauregard and Henry (2009) theorise that job performance enhancement is related to employees' WLB when balance results from the effective use of work-life practices and the presence of supportive managers and the organisational climate. This enhancement comes from the social exchange of

organisational resource offers and employees' behaviours, but not the direct interaction between employees' WLB and job performance.

To summarise this sub-section, WLB is impacted from work-related demands, concurrently the imbalance may contribute to changes in attitudes and behaviour toward work, but the relationship between WLB and job performance is unclear in the current literature. It is the case that this research attempts to explore how demanding work-related antecedents affect Chinese employees' work-life experience, and further to identify the relationship between WLB and job performance to bridge the current research gap.

2.4.3 Work-related resources, WLB and work-related outcomes

The previous argument in relation to the link between WLB and job performance is that employees face a work-life imbalance caused by highly-demanding work, and where this causes poor WLB, the imbalance tends to result in decreased job performance. On the other hand, a WLB can lead to positive links with job-related attitudes such as increased job satisfaction and affective commitment (McNall et al., 2010); decreased turnover intentions (Russo and Buonocore, 2012); higher levels of physical and mental health (Baral and Bhargava, 2010), attendance behaviors (Boyar et al., 2005), and overall job satisfaction (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). The positive associations between WLB and work-related outcomes have led researchers to encourage organisations to offer the work resources and support to reduce the damage from a work-life imbalance and facilitate the WLB for employees. The resourcing intervention at the organisational level, in relation to work practices and support, may optimally serve the demands of individual employees and the organisations. To examine this, it is necessary to review the influence of work-related resourcing interventions on employees' WLB and outcomes.

2.4.3.1 Formal approaches to work-life management —work-life balance policies and practices

Recognising the difficulties of achieving WLB among the multiple roles that employees occupy, governments and organisations have increasingly implemented work practices to facilitate employees' efforts and fulfil work and personal responsibilities. Although the literature recognises several negative effects of these practices, the vast majority of research theoretical and empirical highlights the beneficial outcomes for employees and organisations (Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2012). Scoping work-life balance policies and practices³ (WLBPPs) is reflected in both the academic and practical contributions in policy-making and management practice (Bardoel et al., 2008). This section will introduce the positive intervening factors in influencing employees' WLB, including regulatory policies derived from the legal system and government agenda, and organisational HR practices related to WLB. Then, the design and adoption of the WLB practices will be critically reviewed in relation to the availability, usage and effectiveness of WLB practices to identify the influence of employees' WLB on their work-related outcomes.

(1) The compositions and typology of work-life balance policies and practices

WLBPPs may originate from two main channels, statutory entitlements and enterprise initiatives. First and prominently, the government enacts some statutory regulations and social policies involving WLB features at the national level, which externally regulates a range of meso-level WLBPPs at the organisational level (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). As institutional theory interprets (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), the national macro-environment shapes employers' action through legislation and cultural expectations as

³ Alternative terms used in the work-life/family literature include work-life strategies/policies/practices, family-friendly practices, family-friendly workplace arrangement, family-friendly employment policies and practices.

well as business pressures from successful organisations and competitors’ professional standards, so that companies adopt corresponding strategies, mechanisms or practices to adapt to changes in environmental and institutional circumstances (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009).

Table 2 The definition and categories of WLB practices

Definition	“Any organisational programmes or officially sanctioned practices designed to assist employees with the fulfilment of paid work with other fundamental life roles such as family, education, or leisure.” (Ryan and Kossek, 2008:295)		
Content and categories (Beauregard and Henry, 2009)	Flexible working arrangements	Flexible work hours	Part-time, is usually defined as regular wage employment where the working hours are less than full time contracted hours
			Flexitime, permits employees to vary their start and finish times provided a certain number of hours is worked;
			Job sharing, sharing a full-time job between two employees
			Compressed working week, in which employees work a full week's worth of hours in four days and take the fifth off,
		Flexible workplace	Teleworking, working away from the workplace (e.g. home)
	Workload management	Agreeing with work objectives and targets	
		Agreeing work clear and attainable	
		Training /support in managing workload	
	Leave entitlement	Statutory maternity leave, paternity leave, family leave.	
	Caring support	On-site childcare, financial/informational assistance with childcare and elder-care services.	
Support and well-being programme	On-site gym, stress management programme, employee counselling schemes.		

Secondly, organisations may ‘top up’ these provisions and policies through initiating their own work-life policies/practices, aimed at benefiting employees’ WLB. (Daverth et al.,

2015). Budd and Mumford (2006) argue mutually-beneficial outcomes for the organisation and employees when WLB policies are implemented in place, which can result in greater WLB. Institutionalising work-life practices is a strategic way to take into account employees' work and life concerns (Kossek et al., 2010). In turn, the adoption of WLBPPs may benefit the organisation in terms of talent attraction and retention, and job performance improvement. This research follows Ryan and Kossek's (2008) definition and adopts Beauregard and Henry's (2009) classification to illustrate further details of WLB practices in Table 2 above.

(2) Work-life balance policies and practices as a best practice?

The prevailing rationale for introducing the WLB policy/practice is that employees and organisations could obtain favourable outcomes through the utilisation of these policies and/practices (Dikkers et al. 2007; Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2012). The application of WLBPPs, to some extent, give employees resources, opportunities and supports to cope with work-life conflicts. For example, the design and adoption of practices create a family-friendly work environment so that employees can gain greater control over when and where they work.

Furthermore, the reduced work-life conflict in turn directly or indirectly leads to desirable outcomes in employees' attitudes (improved job satisfaction and organisational commitment), cognitive outcomes (reduced concentration and mental or physical health problems), and behavioural outcomes (increased productivity and performance, reduced absenteeism and turnover intention, reduced stress and burnout) (Eaton 2003). The positive association can be explained by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). With the primary norm of reciprocity, Social exchange theory may help to explain how employees feel they need to reciprocate their organisation with positive work-related attitudes and

behaviours when they experience the enrichment perceived from resources provided by the organisation even though the beneficial effects of flexibility policies are not universal since these policies do not necessarily reduce the conflict between work and life (Budd and Mumford, 2006).

HRM literature suggests that firms should adopt WLB programmes, especially in the competitive labour markets. The increased competition from globalisation and privatisation is damaging employees' quality of life. Employers provide WLBPPs, if feasible and affordable, to those employees who need to ameliorate the tension between work and life demands. In return, employees tend to work more efficiently and remain in the organisation so as to give their employers a competitive advantage compared with those employers who do not provide such options. Thus, coherent WLBPPs as part of wider high-performance HRM practices might lead to increased organisational performance (Lewis, 2003; Bloom and Van Reenan, 2006). The relationship between employees' perceptions of WLB support and organisational development could be explained by the resource-based view (RBV) (Bardoel and De Cieri, 2014). The core argument of the RBV is that organisational resources (e.g. WLBPPs) are likely to provide sustained competitive value for the organisation by facilitating the effective development and deployment of resources for employees. Employees benefiting from these WLBPPs are claimed to be more likely to demonstrate a commitment to work with increased performance. Consequently, emphasizing work-life management within HRM may be conducive to organisational improvement.

However, Beauregard and Henry (2009: 9) question the positive causality and argue that "there is insufficient evidence to support the notion that work-life practices enhance

performance by means of reduced work-life conflict.” The beneficial business case is not necessarily achieved as the organisational WLBPBs may require other supports to achieve organisational performance, measured as enhanced social exchange processes, increased cost savings, improved productivity, and reduced turnover. In the contemporary labour market where savage neo-liberalism is encapsulated by tougher product market competition, and globalisation, WLB practices appear to be an unrealistic cost (Fleetwood, 2007b). Employers are failing to implement or maintain WLBPBs due to the high costs of the practices and management processes to maintain them, which weaken business profitability in the competitive global market. Bloom et al. (2009) researched 732 medium-sized manufacturing firms across the US, France, Germany and the UK finding WLBPBs cannot influence organisational productivity independently, whereas practically they suggest improving WLB is socially desirable, employees like it, and firm productivity does not suffer. Under the cost control principle, there is no strong advocacy for an employer to institutionalise WLB.

In summary, the mixed findings challenge the ‘best practice’ discourse of WLBPBs. The existence of WLBPBs in the workplace by no means brings the expected effects on employees’ WLB and work behaviour. The next section analyses the effect of the WLBPBs ‘bundles’ by looking at the availability, usage and effectiveness.

(3) The availability, usage and effectiveness of work-life balance policies and practices
Emphasis has recently shifted from HR content to HR processes: that is, understanding implementation and employee perceptions of HR practices (Shipton et al., 2016). This is particularly pertinent to the examination and exploration of work-life management at the organisational level. In what follows, inspired by Budd and Mumford (2006) and Daniels and French’s (2006) research, this research understands the effect of WLBPBs in the

organisation including the availability, usage and effectiveness. To be more specific, 1) to what extent do employer/managers make these practices available; 2) to what extent does the employee use them; and 3) whether and to what extent the used policies and practice are perceived effective.

An employer will institute formal policies to follow statutory requirements or organisational policies, and managers authorise the application of WLBPPs at the workplace. The adoption of WLBPPs is generally derived from three rationales: to increase business benefits, to develop employees' commitment, and under pressure from external and internal institutions (i.e. the state and union) (Budd and Mumford, 2006). For the first concerns, WLBPPs are regarded as non-pecuniary benefits to retain and attract employees in the literature (Ryan and Kossek, 2008). An employer tends to make WLBPPs available if it perceives it can gain benefits from doing so. For example, Beauregard and Henry's (2009) research finds an organisation with a high level of female or dual workers, who have greater responsibilities in household division of labour and for dependent care, are more likely to demand the relevant WLBPPs. Different workforce demographics may lead to various WLB practices. If the demands and supply of WLBPPs are divergent, little effect of WLBPPs would be shown on employees and organisation. Accordingly, the organisation may contemplate employees' realistic work-life demands prior to designing and promoting practices to fit with employee requirements and drive the expected positive effect on performance (Chou and Chueng, 2013).

Furthermore, an employer may initiate the WLBPPs for the purpose of developing employees' organisational commitment. However, some research argues the promise of committing to WLB made by employers tends to be regarded as a symbolic and

implementation fails to mirror the employer's promises (Heywood, et al., 2010; Budd and Mumford, 2006) as the commitment is usually compromised by the priority of business goals in practice (Williams al et., 2017). These practices are committed to on paper (policy) but not implemented in practice so that their symbolic functioning makes a little substantial effect on employees and organisation (Budd and Mumford, 2006).

In addition, the institutional system and environment can force employers to adopt WLBPPs. On the one hand, friendly-family policies and WLB campaigns have been legitimated and advocated in most developed economies (Lewis, 1997); on the other, it is also argued that trade unions can use their bargaining power to negotiate WLBPPs for employees and HR representatives have a responsibility to maximise employees benefits from WLBPPs (Budd and Mumford, 2006). However, with the increasing marginalisation of trade unionism and dominance of unitary management, the efficacy of these institutions is weakened; and so, the employer has less incentive to adopt WLBPPs in response to external pressures. Consequently, it is problematic to conclude an expected positive effect of WLBPPs on employees' WLB and their performance.

Secondly, workplace availability of WLBPPs does not guarantee individual employee can use to them. To what extent an employee uses these practices is a critical precursor of their effectiveness. Most workplace surveys and research find that not all workforces have equal access to use WLBPPs (e.g. Van Wanrooy et al., 2013; Gregory and Milner, 2009). They are more likely to be used by some specific groups of employees such as females with dependent care, or managerial, professional and skilled employees (Budd and Mumford, 2006). The inadequate coverage of WLBPPs makes them potentially beneficial only for specific groups, which challenges organisational justice and may lead

employees to be excluded in the workplace. Further, not all employees are aware of the availability of WLBPPs, and there is a knowledge gap between WLB practices implemented by managers and the perceptions of usage to those practices by the employees (Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2012). Only if organisations publicise the practices and make sure all employees are informed about them, can employees recognise and take advantage of these practices (Chou and Chueng, 2013), and thereby develop WLB and, as it is argued, job performance. As Budd and Mumford (2006) posit the effect of WLB practices to increase firm performance depends on the usage rather than workplace availability.

Thirdly, while the WLBPPs are available and used, not all employees perceive the effectiveness. Some constraints in the workplace may cause employees to hesitate to request and utilise WLBPPs. On the one hand, the related work resources are not always available for taking WLBPPs without consideration. For instance, while family leave is given to an employee who is encountering a family emergency, these employees would still need to undertake their full workload if there are no arrangements to allow suitable colleagues to take a share of the work. In general, WLBPPs are solely applied and designed but inclusively linked to the other HRM and employment practices such as working hours, job security, performance and pay (Beauregard and Henry, 2009), which to some extent hinder their effectiveness. On the other, a variety of potential negative work consequences prohibit employees using WLBPPs (ibid.). Employees may fear to face financial problems if they take leaves of absence or by going part-time which decreases their salary; fear of professional constraints if teleworking limits their workplace networking and social capital accumulation; fear of losing training and career development if non-presenteeism is perceived to be associated with a low level of

commitment; or fear of losing face and being discriminated in the workplace. Without corresponding resources support, employees will not take WLBPPs which marginalise them in the workplace.

As a consequence, WLBPPs may not be seen as “best practice” for employees and organisations given that the preconditions including workplace availability, the actual uptake, and employees’ satisfaction on the usage may impact the effect of WLBPPs. Therefore, researchers suggest a multi-stakeholder approach incorporating managers, employees and even their families’ perceptions to consider the effect of WLBPPs (Poelmans and Beham, 2008; Sanchez-Vidal et al., 2012). Different perceptions can lead to the different forms of WLBPPs and different decisions, leading, it is argued, to improved behavioural outcomes at work (ibid.). Such an approach is adopted in this research by considering both managers and employees’ perceptions on adoption of WLBPPs.

In summary, most of the HRM research concludes that work-life practice is not only a temporary solution but a sustainable coping mechanism for employees and organisational development. Given the general advantages of WLBPPs for employees and their organisations, it appears that the aim of HR policies should be to supply resources to develop and run WLBPPs to facilitate employees’ WLB and improve job performance. However, these links have been increasingly questioned, based upon whether employers are prepared to implement costly WLBPPs with the aim of improving their employee's commitment and performance and, where policies and practices do exist, on whether these are known and used by employees, or likely to be effective if used. Given these contradictory arguments about the effectiveness of WLBPPs, this research aims to

explore WLBPPs in Chinese organisations facing fierce competition and rapid development. These debates provide scope to explore the availability, usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs in an under-researched national context, China.

2.4.3.2 Informal approaches to work-life management—organisational culture and climate, leadership, line manager and colleagues

To facilitate the effect of WLBPPs, recent work-life research has identified a supportive work-life context constructed by the work-life culture, awareness and support from senior leadership, attitudes and resistance of line management, and interpersonal relationships among colleagues (e.g. De Cieri et al., 2005; Dikkers et al. 2007; Gordon, et al., 2007). This section will discuss the function of work-related contextual interventions by teasing out the interaction between WLBPPs and the WLB context at the organisational level, and critically review the actors playing a role in determining employees' work-life experience and related work behaviour.

(1) Complementary and mutually-beneficial work-life balance policies and practice, and work-life balance context

The relationship between WLBPPs and the WLB context are inseparable and complementary. Actions taken to implement HR practices are guided by the messages implicit within the workplace. With contextual work-life support, WLBPPs may be more likely effective for employees' WLB and contribute to anticipated favourable outcomes (e.g. Ryan and Kossek, 2008; Timms et al., 2015). The underlying logic acknowledges that institutional initiatives and organisational culture are mutually interactive. Social context theory (Ferris et al., 1998) can be used to explain the cause and effect. The external and internal context of an organisation can impact the HR policy and business performance. The external context consists of national context and industrial environment;

the internal context includes the organisation's culture, climate, and all forms of social interaction led by managers at all levels. Applying this approach helps interpret the influence of culture and context on employees' work-life issues. Externally, the deep-rooted national culture and industrial characteristics play imperceptible but influential roles to mould organisational culture and individual work-life values; more importantly, the internal workplace context is where employees are immersed in the organisational culture which influences employees' work-life perceptions and experience, and the availability and effectiveness of WLBPPs.

According to Schein's (1985) three operational levels of culture (i.e. the artefact, values and assumptions), WLBPPs can be viewed as an artefact, the surface indicator of organisational intentions and the interpersonal support at workplace constitutes a necessary context for assessing WLB. On the one hand, organisational and workplace culture, as intangible resources, invisibly promote institutional practices. Meanwhile, when the institutional practices are adopted, their implementation, in turn, affects and reinforces the cultural construction. That is, WLBPPs can be regarded as explicit and tangible supports, while contextual support is implicit, facilitating employees' WLB in the form of culture and interpersonal interaction. The contextual support promotes work-life policies and cultivates a friendly work environment, which offers employees opportunities to deal with their personal issues while sustaining their employment and career development (Dijkers et al., 2007). If the work-life practice is facilitated by enhanced integration of contextual support, employees are more likely to adjust their resources between paid work and life and manage the tension between multiple role demands, which will alleviate their work-life imbalance (Ezzedeen and Ritchey, 2009; Coffey et al., 2009). A benign cycle may be created, such that the effect of WLBPPs can

be enhanced with a supportive work-life context and concurrently their effective adoption helps create the work-life context in turn.

(2) The composition, availability and effectiveness of work-life balance context

There are two-levels of contextual work-life supports: one is overall workplace cultural values and norms manifested at the organisational level; the other is multi-level lateral cooperation and coordination from managers and fellow employees at the group level (Kossek et al., 2010). Fiksenbaum (2014:657) highlights Allen's definition on supportive organisational culture that it is 'to provide the support for employees' family and personal situations, promotes flexibility and tolerance and support for family needs and obligations. The culture signals the general attitude of the organisation towards employees' work and non-work issues and determines whether organisations invest and offer the work-life resources; whether managers tolerate employees' family commitments, and support and implement the WLBPPs; whether employees feel able to use work-life policies (Thompson and Beauvais, 1999).

The construction of the WLB context at the organisational level requires the collaboration of all levels of management. The leadership needs to identify and value individual and inter-group differences between work and life roles and ensure non-work issues are not regarded as obstacles for employee's work performance (Ryan and Kossek, 2008). Research findings echo this logic indicating that the company's executives play a paramount role in shaping and interpreting the WLB context by a variety of methods. These include initiating and encouraging work-life values and practices; taking care of their employees' work-life needs and are necessary to establish supportive workplace culture (Sturges and Guest, 2004; Fiksenbaum, 2014; Williams et al., 2017) Thus,

positive signals on WLB will cascade WLBPPs and values down through the organisational hierarchy.

The construction of the WLB context may facilitate work-life satisfaction and contribute to positive work outcomes, such as increased affective commitment (Gordon et al., 2007) as well as task and contextual performance (Muse et al., 2008). As social exchange theory implies, motivated employees may reciprocate with better job performance to show their appreciation towards the organisation (Fiksenbaum, 2014). Additionally, in the competitive external labour market, organisations with an inclusive and supportive culture can be a signal of ‘a good business’ that cares about employees, and which attracts and retains talents and business investments (Ryan and Kossek, 2008).

However, the research literature has also found no hard evidence showing the direct casualty between organisational culture and enhanced performance due to the difficulty in measuring organisational culture (Ngo et al., 2009). It is also argued that organisational culture tends to serve work activities rather than non-work activities, indicating that culture sustains the “business case” in paid work rather than “humanised care” in the personal sphere. For instance, in far too many cases ‘long working norms’ and the ‘ideal worker’ are engrained by the organisational slogan of ‘Treat Company as Home’ with business-minded purpose. This may detrimentally damage employees’ WLB, leaving little motivation (or scope) to perform well at work (Thompson and Beauvais, 1999). Given these limitations, the group level of WLB support may be more influential in the workplace, as a positive force in affecting employees’ work and life choices.

Concerning the group level, WLB support is exercised by managers and colleagues.

While work-life policies and culture might be designed at the central level; they are

generally implemented and disseminated by line managers (McCarthy et al., 2010). When it comes to the interpretation and enactment of HR policies and practices, line managers actively undertake HR functions. Thus, line managers' attitudes and behaviours are the critical factors to influence the access, adoption and effectiveness of WLBPPs and foster a supportive work-life context, which in turn may impact employees' work-life outcomes (Goh et al., 2015; Fiksenbaum, 2014).

Currie and Procter (2001) argue that “line managers are the intermediary actor who mediates, negotiate and interpret connections between the organisational strategic and operational levels.” They are divided into middle-level and front-line managers (supervisors) (Bos-Nehles, 2010). The former is responsible for facilitating and coordinating day-to-day organisational activities, and the latter undertakes direct supervisory responsibility for their team. These roles may both instrumentally and emotionally affect employees' WLB through general and specific support of work and non-work demands (Ryan and Kossek, 2008; Kossek et al., 2011b). Instrumentally, line managers' support on giving the access of WLBPPs may not only help employees to manage their work to accommodate their non-work demands but also ensure no impediment (i.e. applying policies unequally across employees) shall arise (Budd and Mumford, 2005). This role is also responsible for publicising work-life policies to raise employees' awareness and understanding of WLBPPs. Emotionally, individuals may be less likely to feel that their lives are out of balance if they know that their employer has some consideration for their lives outside work (Sturges and Guest, 2004). Manager behaviours can be conducive to building and fostering such a positive work culture (Kossek et al., 2011b).

Another essential active actor is a colleague who acts as a potentially significant source in the workplace. Beehr et al. (2000) suggested that the nature of collegial support incorporates general, emotional, and instrumental types. Employees can easily access their colleagues for emotional support, advice and help with work and family problems. The comforting conversations can provide (some) comfort to employees facing work and life stresses that help to relieve work-life tensions. Instrumentally, if a colleague is willing to cover the job temporarily for a colleague who needs to look after a sick child or parent, that could enhance the employees' work-life management (Valcour et al., 2011).

Furthermore, interpersonal support at work not only fosters a friendly and mutually-supportive work atmosphere but also constitutes a handy and economic approach in facilitating the effectiveness of work-life practice because, for example, it releases the pressure on managers to seek alternative arrangements to cover absence from the job. In the long run, a work-life friendly team environment created by a group of supportive colleagues may mitigate the tensions between employee involvement and work intensification (Neirotti, 2018). Empirical research findings state that collegial support helps employees coping with competing for work-life demands and is related to a high level of WLB. Moreover, the collegial support offers a similar or even more significant level of beneficial effects compared to either a line manager's support or supportive organisational culture for employees' WLB (Thompson and Prottas, 2006).

Overall, the WLB context as well as supportive managerial and collegial behaviour may make a complementary effect on employees' WLB. The system of work-life culture and social interaction show the potential to enhance the availability and effect of WLBPPs and facilitate employees' WLB and subsequent job performance, especially for those who

strive to maintain participation in both the personal and professional domains. Turning to the under-researched context of China, this research raises the question as to how Chinese workplace culture affects employees' WLB and their work behaviour. It is interesting to examine why organisations may be reluctant to adopt such a culture (i.e. whether there any antecedent institutional and organisational barriers); and in its absence whether 'contextual' WLB supports have been developed. Thus, the research proposes exploring the contextual WLB support both in organisational and group level in the Chinese workplace.

In summary, the design of WLBPPs will only have the potential to be effective if they address (both) organisational and employees' concerns. For the policies and practices to be effective in their implementation and operation, recognition, support and endorsement both at organisational and group level are essential (Kossek et al., 2010). In this respect, where WLBPPs are embedded into the workplace, there is scope to nurture and develop a supportive organisational environment and internalise this in relation to the WLB context. Additionally, such a WLB context can be cultivated through the implementation of WLBPPs, which optimises the organisational resources to help balance employees' WLB and, subsequently, generates more positive work attitudes and behaviours in turn (Chan et al., 2015).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of WLB research. The complex and dynamic nature of WLB challenges researchers consistently when seeking to define WLB. This chapter develops a conceptual framework to scope the meaning of WLB systematically based on the adoption of an overall-based approach. This is argued to be the most appropriate way to conceptualise WLB as it highlights how an

individual's fulfilment of role priority can be contextualised under certain circumstances. As indicated by Greenhaus and Allen (2011) and Grzywacz and Carlson's (2007), this research argues WLB is determined by individuals' work-life priorities and contextual influences across the work and life domain, especially work demands and resources, which is further entangled and impacted by the external macro-environment. Under the influence of these multi-layered factors, people's perceptions and experience of WLB can be heterogeneous and dynamic, which is difficult to be confined within a single and fixed work-life model (e.g. conflict or enrichment). Consequently, this chapter contributes to the wider thesis by developing a conceptual framework for analysing WLB where multi-layered factors are considered when considering the meaning of WLB in the Chinese context.

This chapter then scrutinises the general construct of WLB including its antecedents, outcomes, and interventions at the organisational level that contribute to the thesis by identifying the key WLB factors required to construct a theoretical framework. As personal and family heterogeneity in the home (private) sphere lies beyond organisations' control (Keeney et al., 2013), in line with the prevailing Anglo-American work-life research, this research focuses on WLB-related factors in the work domain. It is argued that demanding work antecedents (e.g. working hours, workload) are largely identified as main drivers to impact employees' WLB leading to negative work-related outcomes (e.g. reduced job performance). This raises the issue of the role of work-life management within HRM, to facilitates employees' WLB by investing work-related resources and implementing interventions (i.e. WLBPPs and WLBC). Notably, it can be critically argued that work demands do not necessarily lead to such interventions facilitating the employees' WLB or lead to the expected work-related outcomes. Business pressures,

institutional barriers, and managerial constraints may increase the work demands and weaken the availability and effectiveness of any interventions, which, in turn, obstruct any beneficial relationship between employees' WLB and performance. Hence, work demands and resources related to employees' WLB can interactively impact on employees' WLB and performance. Prior to looking at these factors in the Chinese context, it is appropriate to construct a theoretical framework that identifies and explains the interplay between work demands and resources on employees' WLB and job performance. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Developing a Theoretical Framework to Research WLB

3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework used to address the research aims and central questions, and to frame the methodological approach and structure the research findings. Following the previous chapter, this chapter constructs a theoretical framework to identify and explain the interplay between work demands and resources on employees' WLB and job performance at the organisational level. The framework is mainly built upon a predominant work-life model, namely the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) that been used in HRM and organisational research conducted in various countries, although few of the studies are in China (Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Lu, 2015). The adoption of this model not only justifies employing the theory for WLB research but also to critically test its viability in the Chinese context. In addition, a range of labour and sociological theories are also used to explain the inter-relationships between work-related variables.

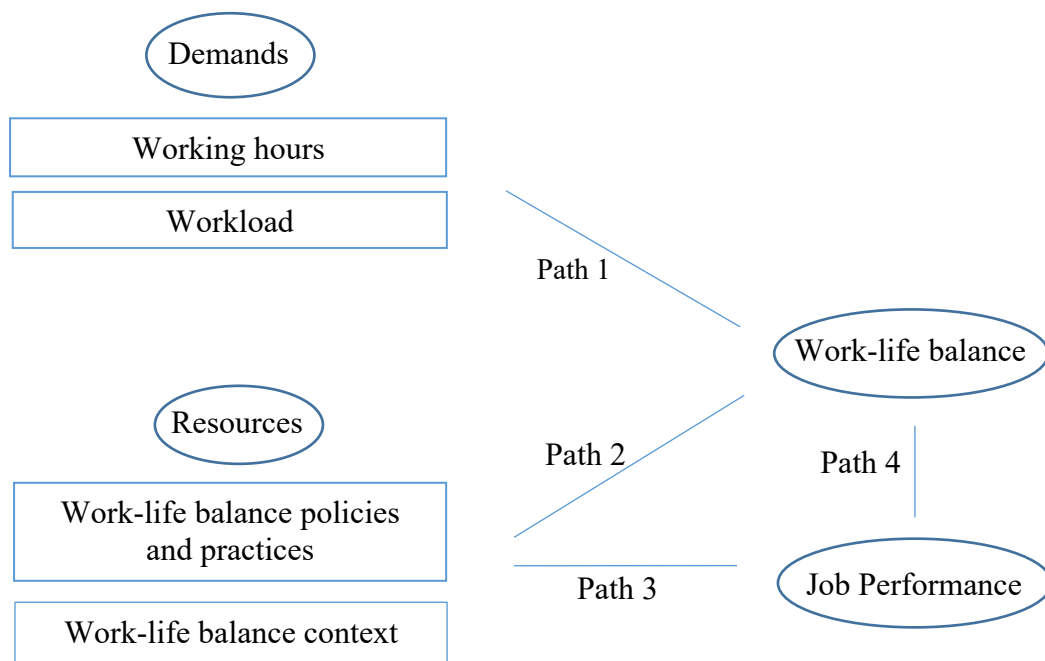
This chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical framework in section 3.1. This section outlines the composition of the framework in terms of the variables and their inter-relationships and identifies a range of models and theories used to interpret the relationships between variables. The subsequent sections are structured to expand on each of the relationships theoretically. First, the relationships between employees' WLB and the main work demands (i.e. working hours and workload) and resources (i.e. WLBPPs and WLBC) and explained by the JD-R model, are examined in section 3.2. Second, social exchange theory is applied to interpret the effect of perceived work resources on employees' job performance in section 3.2.3 and, thirdly, the link between employees' WLB and job performance is demonstrated from the perspectives of employees and the

organisation in section 3.3. This chapter concludes in section 3.4 with a critical review of the theoretical framework and indicates how it is used to frame the methodological approach and structure the research findings.

3.1 Overview of the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the present study is outlined in Figure 4. It is constructed to identify and explain the interplay between work demands, resources and employees' WLB and job performance at the organisational level. As was demonstrated in the last chapter, while WLB is traditionally regarded as a personal issue, an individual's priorities in relation to their WLB is significantly impacted by work-related factors. The theoretical framework seeks to explore, therefore, the interplay of the main WLB related factors. Based upon the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), these factors are framed into two groups, work demands and resources. The inter-relationships between work demands and resources in relation to employees' WLB and work-related outcome, job performance are theoretically outlined in Paths 1, 2 3 and 4.

Figure 4 The theoretical framework in the present research



In terms of Path 1, the impact of the main work demands (i.e. working hours and workload) on WLB is critically reviewed. The JD-R model highlights how work demands tend to exhaust employees through an energy depletion process, leading employees to experience a work-life imbalance. However, it can be argued that when working hours and workload are perceived as resources by some employees, individuals' overall work-life satisfaction might be positively affected – i.e. they perceive resourceful outcomes from the demands.

For Path 2, the motivational dimension of the JD-R model is used to interpret the beneficial links between work resources (i.e. WLBPPs and WLBC) and employees' WLB. Notably, referring to the arguments reviewed in the previous chapter, WLBPPs and WLBC can be resources that potentially lead to a positive WLB, but only when these resources are available and implemented effectively. The overall effect of work resources on WLB can be critically analysed by reference to the “business case”, “institutional case” and “social case”. The theoretical explanations of these cases are rooted in the neo-classical economic theory (Hicks, 1969), institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), internal labour market theory (Becker, 1964), and social cooperate responsibility (Norman and MacDonald, 2004).

Regarding Path 3, the effect of work resources (WLBPPs and WLBC) on employees' performance is explained by reference to Blau's (1964) social exchange theory from a sociological perspective. When resources are provided to employees, they will feel an obligation to respond in kind through hard work, commitment and loyalty which, in turn, may enhance their job performance. It can be argued, however, that the beneficial social exchange will only occur if employees perceive work-life resources as effective and

believe them to be distributed in a fair way; otherwise, they can result in counterproductive work behaviour.

Path 4 examines the relationship between employees' WLB and the key work-related outcome, job performance. This link can be theorised by the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) at the individual level and attitude-behaviour theory (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) for the organisational level. According to the COR model, employees tend to conserve their resources to maintain WLB. Work-life imbalance may cause stress which has a detrimental effect on their effective functioning at work and job performance. By contrast, a feeling of work-life balance will act as a cushion for this stress and lead to better performance. Accordingly, drawn from attitude-behaviour theory, employees who experience WLB in their workplace may respond positively, which may lead to favourable work behaviours for their organisation. Nevertheless, external business pressures, internal performance pressures, and the nature of the employment relationship can challenge the links set in both theories.

Each path within the theoretical framework will be expanded based upon the specified theories in the following subsections.

The construction of this deductive framework is used to guide the investigation of WLB issues in the under-researched Chinese context. As Tsui (2004: 506-507) argues, adapted western theories and models are “particularly useful in analysing familiar issues in novel contexts that allows the connection to the current body of literature while promising the discovery of new sight.” However, it should also be appreciated that the theories and models integrated into this framework may not fit in with the Chinese context. Therefore, this research also attempts to test the applicability and limitations of these Anglo-

American work-life theories, frameworks and arguments, examining whether, or to what extent, the western-dominated work-life discourse can be applied into a different economic, institutional, social and cultural context.

3.2 Work demands and resources and employees' WLB

3.2.1 The overview and application of JD-R model

The research framework concentrates on the employees' work demands and resources considering work is dominant and less negotiable for employees (Guest, 2002b). Based upon the theoretical underpinning of the JD-R model, this research attempts to identify how the demands and resources might influence employees' WLB through the depletion and motivation processes respectively, among which working hours and workload are assumed as main demands to be examined; the WLB policies and practices and WLB context as the resources to be explored.

The evolution of the JD-R model previously derived from early research concerning work as a negative stressor (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). It is used to explore the negative impact of work on employees' WLB and presents a series of theories to explain the depletion mechanism. For instance, the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) can be used to interpret the depletion process between work-related demands and the work-life experience. This theory posits that individuals always have the intention to access, possess and maintain their important resources. If employees experience a high level of work demands, and the input-output ratio of the individual's resources is imbalanced, it will lead to adverse reactions, such as burnout (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Instead of a single demands side, Demerouti et al., (2001:502) develop the JD-R model and argue all the work characteristics can be divided into two elements: demands and resources.

Job demands refer to those physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs (e.g., exhaustion);

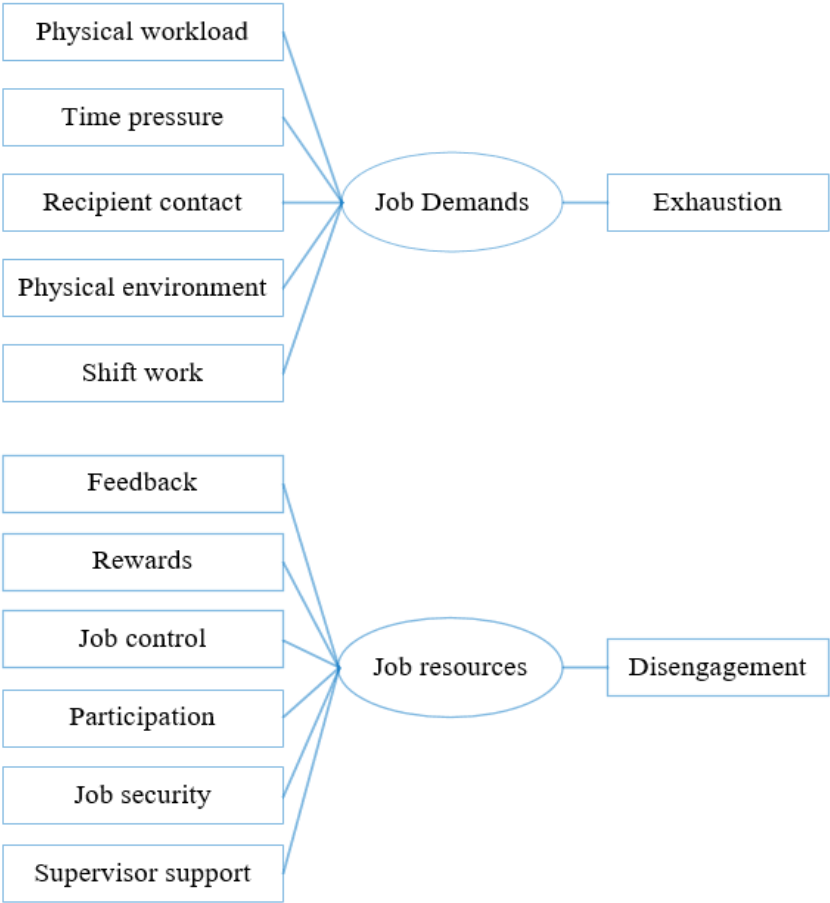
Job resources refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of the job that may: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development.

The specific factors in each group are listed in Figure 5 below. Job demands refer to material, psychological, social or organisational demands at work, such as excessive workload, time pressure, role load or conflict, shift work. Regarding the job resources, Demerouti and her colleagues divided the resources into external resources (organisation and society) and internal resources (cognitive and action patterns). Since the internal resources can vary between individuals, it is difficult to reach a general agreement about internal resources, so they established the model with a focus on external resources. This research follows this logic too. In addition to traditionally-discussed material rewards, increasing attention is paid to job resources involving the psychological, social or organisational resources, such as feedback, work control, social support from superiors, non-financial rewards, and job security. (ibid.).

In the initial research of the JD-R model, Demerouti and her colleague research those demands and resources' synergic influence on employees who work in service, and transport sectors. High demands led employees to exhaustion through energy depletion, and inadequate or limited resources led employees to feel disengagement by undermining their motivation. To be more specific, excessive work demands can consume the physical

and mental resources of employees, and the absence of work resources increase the difficulties, the two processes together lead to work-life conflict (Bakker et al., 2004; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). On the contrary, with job resources, employees may be more likely to buffer the conflict from the high work demands (Bakker et al., 2014; Demerouti and Bakker, 2011).

Figure 5 The Job demand-resource model (Demerouti et al., 2001)



Given that, the JD-R model includes three core assumptions (ibid.). Firstly, it posits a "dual path" assumption where depletion and motivation are coexistent when employees are at work. In the second assumption, job resources may relieve the various negative impacts of the work demands. The final assumption is linked to coping assumptions. Job resources are better able to improve the level of work involvement and motivation under the high job demands, whereas the high job demands may encourage employees to make

full use of job resources to attain work objectives. Accordingly, when applying this model into the work-life interface, it is plausible that the job characteristics affecting an employee's work-life experience are not necessarily flowing in the unilaterally negative direction but coexists as part of a dual path involving gain and depletion. Both the demands of, and resources at, work impact on individuals' work-life experiences and may possibly further affect their work behaviours. Thus, this study attempts to delve how work factors affect employees' WLB based on the main streams of the JD-R model.

The JD-R model initially notes the consequences and contributions of specific job demands and resources to explain that WLB may vary across occupations because every occupation will have distinctive demands and resources factors. Empirical research has tested this model in different sectors including professional, service and transport sectors, and in a wide range of western countries (Demerouti, et al., 2001; Bakker, et al., 2003b; Hakanen, et al., 2008). These studies find the two categories of job demands and resources may be applied across occupations and sectors. The JD-R model may be applied to a wide range of occupational settings related to improving employee well-being, such as WLB (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model predicts that demands will negatively influence WLB, with resources having a positive impact (Bardoel and Drago, 2016). The prevalent propositions are high demands in one domain that contribute to problems in performing roles and tasks in the other, while resources (e.g. discretion and support) are associated with work and/or personal spheres might buffer and reduce the demands to reach a satisfactory WLB (Voydanoff, 2005). Among the work resources, family-friendly policies, organisational culture with WLB values, and supervisory support are found as the three most effective types (Lu, 2015). Therefore, this research primarily attempts to interpret a theoretical framework based on the JD-R model to address the research

objective: how do work-related demands and resources influence employees' WLB? The framework is designed to identify how cumulative demands (particularly working time and excessive workload) and resources (organisational practices, workplace culture and social interaction) offered at the organisational level can affect employees' work-life status.

This study aims to examine Chinese employees' WLB issues in order to not only supplement the external validity of WLB related theories but also to highlight the possible distinctiveness, if any, of the Chinese context. In terms of the JD-R model, extensive work-family/life research from various countries, including a few studies in China, has provided evidence that the JD-R model can serve as a generic framework to analyse employees' WLB in specific contexts (Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Lu and Cooper, 2015). Therefore, the details of the process and interactions between work demands and resources in relation to employees' WLB are examined in the following sections.

However, extreme caution is required when seeking to predetermine an employee's work-life experience through this model. Both western and Chinese researchers pay attention to the differential work-life relationships that are embedded in the specific context. Spector et al., (2007) highlights the findings of WLB research based on western workers may not be generalised to Chinese workers who have experience of tolerating work-to-life intrusions under distinctive (shines) factors, such as business pressure, financial consideration and culture (e.g. collectivist views). The contrast in the economic, legal and political institutional systems and the socio-cultural environment may create disparities in the nexus of WLB and its antecedents, interventions and consequences. Therefore, in an age of rapid transformation, the outcomes of Chinese WLB research may be

particularly valuable to place against that Anglo-American derived work-family/life models, to avoid hastily generalising these models to the Chinese context without comprehensive examination or testing (Lu, 2015). Details relating to the contextualisation of WLB in China will be fully discussed in the next chapter.

3.2.2 Work demands and their depleted impact on employees' WLB

While employees' work involves various work demands and resources, demands rather than resources are claimed to have the dominant impact on employees' WLB, with the individual more sensitive to the demands required rather than the resources perceived (Demerouti et al., 2001). Excessive work demands may affect an employee's work-life experience through the depletion process, with working hours and workload considered two significant components of work demands (Spector et al., 2007; Eikhof et al., 2007; Richman et al., 2008; Blyton, 2011). Consequently, the following two sub-sections will critically demonstrate Path 1 located in the theoretical framework - the relationships between the two factors and employees' WLB.

3.2.2.1 Working hours

Working hours are the key feature of employment and are consistently referred to as a primary work antecedent of WLB that "can either help facilitate WLB (e.g., through reductions in working hours and certain forms of flexible working time arrangements) or hinder it (e.g., excessively long hours, unpredictable schedules)" (ILO, 2019). The longer hours an employee works, the fewer hours he or she devotes to non-work areas including families, friendships and the community. The significance of time imbalance has triggered extensive studies of WLB highlighting that time-conflict is regarded as the most distinct source to cause a work-life imbalance (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). This is particularly the case for the managerial and professional employees who are primarily

researched because these groups are deemed to have more difficulty in finding time for their personal life due to the all-encompassing nature of their work (Lewis et al., 2007; Warren, 2015) and the extension of working hours such as commuting time and business travel time (Beswick, 2003). Based upon the depletion process within the JD-R model, it is explained that extra and excessive time expanding on role performance may drain energy and therefore generate imbalance, and it can further lead to the harmful work-related outcomes (Blyton, 2011; Kim and Chung, 2016).

But is working longer a cause of a poor WLB? The association between employees' working hours and WLB may be more complex than the theoretical explanations located in the contemporary competitive labour market. When working hours are closely related to pay and development needs, long working hours do not necessarily negatively impact on employees' WLB. Blyton (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of WLB studies in a Anglo-American context, finding that the majority of employees worked longer to afford their various work-life demands, and only a minority of employees were willing to work fewer hours and tolerate less pay. Under the influence of pay as a material driver, the strategy of working longer to 'get more pay for a better life' can challenge the negative relationship between working hours and WLB.

In addition to financial concerns, working longer is significant in the contemporary workplace due to its relationship with promotion and career development. Time spent at work is visibly seen as an indicator of employees' productivity, contributions, commitments and even personal value (Lewis, 1997). Specifically, Bailyn (1993: 211) demonstrates, "putting in time—being visibly at work, often for long and on-call hours—is seen as a sign of commitment, of loyalty, of competence and high potential, and in

many cases as an indicator, in and of itself, of productive output”. Employees who work the most significant amounts of time for their organisations are generally defined as productive and committed and could be regarded as valued employees who tend to have more potential advancement opportunities in terms of pay and career, compared to those who work standard or reduced hours (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). Given these explanations for additional voluntary working, the adverse effect of working time and WLB can plausibly be challenged. But in contemporary society, for most employees longer working hours are involuntary with little opportunity to control the number of hours (Lewis, 1997). Very often due to fear of losing employment or in the face of pay cuts, employees are forced to demonstrate the ‘commitment’ under the performance indicators and business managerial demands by sacrificing their non-work time and putting in extra ‘discretionary or voluntary’ effort (Lewis et al., 2007).

3.2.2.2 Workload

The work overload is the primary antecedent of increasing working hours. Frone et al. (1997b) characterise work overload as the number of the hours, the sacrifice of time, and the sense of frustration at the inability to complete tasks in the time given. Thus, overload is not just the sheer volume of work required but is defined as a quantitative increase in, and stressful forms, of workload. According to the depletion process, excessive workloads may deplete employees’ resources and cause emotional and physical exhaustion at work, which then negatively spillover into personal lives and contribute to work-life imbalance (Chen et al., 2017).

However, the workload may exert positive pressure rather than stress when employees are facing work challenges, which may question the depletion arguments of the JD-R

model. As Schaufeli and Taris (2014) find although the complexity, uncertainty and tension of the workload can impair an employee's energy to balance work and life, these challenges inherently motivate those employees who treat these as opportunities to learn and achieve their career prospects (ibid.). Some employees may view extra workload as opportunities to learn knowledge and develop skills, and thereby meet work demands and perform better (Crawford et al., 2010). This is said to be the case in particular, for young and career-focused employees (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014).

In summary, the depletion process of the JD-R model demonstrates the negative effect between the two main work demands and WLB. However, when working hours and workload are perceived as resources by some employees, individuals' overall work-life satisfaction might be positively affected – i.e. they perceive resourceful outcomes from the demands. Thus, work demands can create a "dual path" where depletion and motivation coexist for employees out of their work demands.

3.2.3 Work resources and their motivational impact on employees' WLB

This section examines the relationship between organisational resources and WLB. As the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) suggests, work resources may buffer the negative impact of work demands and stimulate motivational potentials when work demands are high. Researchers have called for research to seek work resources that facilitate employee's WLB (e.g. Grzywacz and Calson, 2007) among which the WLB policies and practices and its implemented context could be the significant resources that offer employees' opportunities to grow, develop, and achieve the levels of functioning in their work and life. However, as the critical management demonstrated in the previous chapter, the effect of these two resources might be limited by the availability, usage and

effectiveness in the implementation. Given that, the motivation process might be discounted and even trigger the depletion process. The following two parts will critically theorise Path 2 located in the theoretical framework - the relationships between WLB policies and practices and its context, and employees' WLB in details.

3.2.3.1 Work-life balance policies and practices

This section will critically discuss the relationship between WLBPPs and WLB from the perspectives of the 'business case', the 'institutional case' and the 'social case'. The growing research into formal policies and practices (WLBPPs) argue that their implementation is conducive to improving employee well-being and organisational sustainability, especially if embedded in a supportive organisational and managerial context (e.g. Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Lu, 2015). The main rationale to explain best practice work-life management is underpinned, overwhelmingly, by managerialist views: a good employer with legitimate, rational and socially-responsible characteristics will treat employees well and fairly in terms of adopting and implementing WLBPPs. However, all these approaches can be critiqued.

Employers were reluctant to invest in the workplace WLBPPs for a long time until the 'business case' for the organisation was considered (McCarthy et al., 2010). The 'business case' refers to employers providing employees' with nonpecuniary benefits (e.g. WLBPPs) for profit maximisation and cost-effectiveness (Budd and Momford, 2006). The "business case" reflects a view derived from the 'managerialist-determined HRM' perspective. Strategic HRM highlights the need for integration between HR and a business strategy. Therefore, the HRM practice is largely determined by employers based on business strategies focused upon cost-effectiveness and profit-maximisation (Lamond and Zheng, 2010; Boxall and Purcell, 2011). This can be rooted in the logic of neo-

classical economic theory - a mainstream modern economic theory established by a group of economists such as Hicks, Stigler, and Stanley (Hicks, 1969).

This economic theory highlights work productivity and efficiency and determination of factors of productions (including the workforce) in the market through supply and demand. In order to achieve high productivity, as a significant factor of production, employees may be treated well, invested in and developed, leading to the adoption of WLBPPs. Namely, organisations will introduce WLBPPs if they secure increased profits from these policies and practices, arising from increased productivity or decreased labour costs. By offering these practices, when needed or requested, employees are allowed to adjust their working schedule or patterns either on a temporary or long-term basis, with the support of organisational resources to facilitate their WLB. By doing so, employees are deemed to appreciate the value attached to utilising WLBPPs, which are 'repaid' through enhancements to work behaviour such as higher job performance (Beauregard and Henry, 2009).

Nevertheless, not all employees can access WLBPPs, the availability of which are determined in the labour market through supply and demand. According to the neo-classical economic perspective, the employer makes the rational management decision depending on labour supply and demand. If the labour supply is limited, the rational employer can choose to retain employees by offering pecuniary and nonpecuniary benefits (e.g. granting flexibility and leave); by contrast, the WLBPPs may not be available for some employees who do not have the core competencies needed by the organisation and who can be easily replaced from within the external labour market.

What is worse, it is readily seen that the 'business case' of WLBPPs appears to be risky rather than beneficial for employees' wellbeing. As Fleetwood (2007b) argues the adoption of WLBPPs is usually more of a short response to labour shortages and market pressures rather than aiming at employee's well-being. That is, even if WLBPPs are offered, the employer usually adopts these out of cost-effective business demands with little or no consideration of personal issues. It masks the employer-friendly flexibility secured through WLBPPs with employee-friendly rhetoric. For instance, when employees request temporal and contingent flexibility, this reduces employees' work demands on the surface but will have detrimental consequences on their pay and development (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010), which may be counterproductive for such employees' WLB (Blyton, 2011). In such situations, WLBPPs may not be seen as supportive resources to relieve the work demands, as is demonstrated in the second assumption of the JD-R model. As such the availability and effectiveness of WLBPPs are not guaranteed, significantly undermining claims of a positive effect on employees' performance. As the systematic review of the related work-life literature (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011) illustrates, a "business case" for offering flexible working arrangements had not been demonstrated.

Legal requirements can make WLBPPs available at the organisational level. The "institutional case" acknowledges that organisational behaviour can be regulated. According to institutional theory, the institutional environment can influence the development of formal structures and rules in an organisation, often more profoundly than market pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). An employer will adopt the WLBPPs out of consideration for external job regulations stipulated by the key institutions such as the state and trade unions, integrating the requirements into their internal policies and practices (Kossek and Lambert, 2004). So, the 'institutional case'

rests upon labour legislation related to employees' work-life rights and wellbeing. This sets the standard to legitimise WLBPPs in the organisation.

However, the institutional environment may not necessarily guarantee effective and equal implementation of WLBPPs. This may be because such high-commitment and high-performance systems prevailing in the organisational HRM may marginalise the effectiveness of institutional case in their implementation (Eaton, 2003). This could be explained by internal labour market theory in terms of the human capital perspective (Becker, 1964). It is argued that human resource practices are employed in order to increase employees' commitment and non-supervised performance. WLBPPs can be one of these human capital investments. Managers can reasonably use it to motivate and maintain employees' commitment (Budd and Mumford, 2006). However, the high-commitment work systems are found, to some extent, to enhance work intensification, with employees tending to or being forced to work longer or harder to meet the commitment or performance indicators (Hyman et al., 2005). Taking the work-life rights and benefits such as flexibility and leaves can take the employee away from the workplace, which may be interpreted as poor organisational commitment (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). Those less-often present tend to be considered as less engaged and less suitable for promotion even if they reach the same level of capacity or targeted performance compared to the others not taking the WLBPPs (ibid.). Accordingly, even if the WLBPPs are externally regulated and made available within organisations, the usage of WLBPPs might be in a lower level considering the strong social linkages with employees' commitment or performance.

A canonical example is the teleworker who is not only bound to professional isolation that hinders professional development through networking, such as on-site training, mentoring and informal learning, but who will also experience much more work intrusion into his or her personal life (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Employees working under these types of HRM systems and business pressures are more likely to suffer substantive work demands with little benefits from the available WLBPPs (Bardoel and De Cieri, 2014). While the second assumption of the JD-R model is that work resources may relieve the various negative impacts of the work demands, the positive link between WLBPPs and employees' WLB is not always evident in practice.

The 'social case' is exemplified in organisations that promote corporate social responsibility, where this is concerned with employees' rights and well-being, and where consideration is given to non-work needs and aspirations (Norman and MacDonald, 2004). In theory, the availability and effectiveness of WLBPPs may be optimised for employees (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013) because employees are more likely to participate in non-work issues as far as possible while sustaining their employment and career development under the arrangements promoted by the 'social case'. However, this approach is problematic to apply to the workplace. The social case is likely to be formulaic at the organisational level, seen as vision or rhetoric, while in reality employees' wellbeing may be easy to sacrifice under the business pressure and high-pressure management. Even if the availability and effectiveness of some WLBPPs seem to be socially guaranteed in the political agenda and public, employees' wellbeing may be sacrificed due to the priority of business needs and unitary managerial operation to meet the core organisational targets.

The WLBPPs can be the direct and essential resources that enable employees to acquire more opportunities in fulfilling their work and personal life. The findings of research into the resource motivating process of the JD-R model consistently show a positive picture between WLBPPs and its impact on employees' WLB (Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Dallimore and Mickel, 2006). However, as this sub-section has argued, the positive link between WLBPPs and WLB is not guaranteed when formalised WLBPPs are implemented informally from the perspectives of the 'business case', 'institutional case' and 'social case'. The extent to which these more formal approaches to WLBPPs can be effective requires an understanding of the workplace context, which is addressed in the next sub-section.

3.2.3.2 The work-life balance context

The WLB contextual supports are argued to be key units to understand the motivational process of work resources on WLB. An organisation's WLB context signals the general attitude of the organisation towards (the relative importance of) employees' WLB (Li et al., 2017). To be more specific, it determines whether and to what extent the organisation invests and offers the WLBPPs; to what extent the managers are willing to apply WLBPPs and tolerate employees' family commitments; whether employees perceive organisational resources to be supportive and are not worried to use WLBPPs (Thompson and Beauvais, 1999; Muse et al., 2008). This sub-section will identify how the various levels of workplace context work as a supportive resource to facilitate employees' WLB.

At the level of the organisation, the employer tends to care for their employees through a caring organisational culture (Sturges and Guest, 2004; Fiksenbaum, 2014). When working in an organisation with a caring culture, WLBPPs are more likely to be implemented in line with the 'social case' and employees should be more likely to use

available practices, while the organisation can be seen as ‘a good business’ (Ryan and Kossek, 2008). More critically, where line managers have the opportunity to request, access and use the WLBPPs, their recognition of an attitude, towards work-life concerns can work as supportive resources to facilitate the employees’ WLB.

The importance of managerial support can be explained from Li et al.’s (2017) framework, where the work-life management process is based on four dimensions of managerial orientations: task, relationship, change and ethical. Line managers with task orientation may manage employees’ workload in a reasonable way. Relationship-orientated managers tend to show their sympathy and support for employees that would provide instrumental and emotional resources to stipulate WLB. With regard to the ‘change’ orientation, managers are more likely to give employees autonomy and encourage them to exercise their work flexibly. In particular, if a manager has had a beneficial experience where using WLBPPs or gaining work-life support, they are more likely to support employees when appropriate. Last but not least, ethical-oriented managers consider all staff to have a legitimate life outside of work. It is unethical, for instance, if managers do not permit sick leave while employees are sick or do not show empathy towards employees who need time off to accommodate emergency family issues. These managerial supports are found to be significantly associated with employees’ WLB and also impact on the effective use of WLBPPs (Kossek et al., 2011b; Goh et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, it is noted that some conditions can limit the effectiveness of managerial support on employees’ work-life experiences. Firstly, managers are less able to adjust employees’ work arrangements when they lack management jurisdiction to introduce flexibly. Most managers exercise their discretion (or not) based upon their perception of

the level of institutionalised organisational support (Kossek et al., 2011b). As long as the formal work-life values are established and accepted at the organisational level, managers will be allowed to show their sympathy in relation to employees' work-life issues with fewer constraints caused by the business case.

Secondly, the effectiveness of the work-life context may also determine the extent to which managers implement supports such as flexible working and work-life wellbeing in a fair and inclusive way. As Ryan and Kossek (2008:299) note, the pertinent issue of work-life management is related to “supervisor support for policy use, the degree to which policies are seen as universally available to all employees, whether policy use is an entitlement or must be negotiated, and the quality of communication regarding how and when the policy can be used”. An unfair resource distribution may reduce employees' organisational commitment and cause workplace grievances (*ibid.*). For instance, unfair distribution is often coupled with gender stereotypes. A male employee may be less likely to access work-life support as their family issues are often ignored under the traditional patriarchal influence compared to their female counterparts (Gregory and Milner, 2009). By contrast, Siegel et al. (2005) conclude that organisational commitment seems to be less impacted if procedural justice exists in the workplace so that access to policies and procedures is perceived to be fair. Employees who perceive this fairness are said to be able to build trusting reciprocal relationships with their managers and are less likely to experience negative consequences by taking advantage of WLBPPs.

However, the tension between business pressures and employees' work-life needs can lead managers to hesitate to accept or promote work-life supports. For managers, the priority is to get the work done and cost-effectively meet the group or departmental

performance targets. The effective use of WLBPPs may be subject to increasing operating costs and cause managers to be very cautious about showing their empathy in relation to employees' WLB needs (Coffey et al., 2009).

Last but not least, the workplace interaction with colleagues is another crucial supporting source for an individual's WLB and the organisation. Substantial work sharing can offer resources to employees who are struggling with work-life overload. For instance, it is beneficial that colleagues are willing to temporarily cover the work of a colleague who needs to care for the sick child/elderly (Valcour et al., 2011). Furthermore, collegial support can be a cost-effective and easily obtainable resource for work-life management. For example, being involved in a supportive work-life context, colleagues can mutually share their work-life experience through daily communication, which formulates an informal, supportive work-life atmosphere in the workplace. Thompson and Prottas (2006) conducted empirical research finding that support from colleagues had similar or even greater directly beneficial effects compared to either line manager support or organisational culture in the case of WLB.

Overall, the contextual work-life support constructed by the support of the organisation, the line manager and colleagues may have a significant effect on employees' WLB. While the business case and managerial informality could challenge the motivational aspects of contextual work-life support as a resource, the existence of these three facets may enhance the effect of WLBPP, and thus act as motivational resources. Employees may be more likely to grow, develop, and achieve the required levels of work and secure a WLB even when confronted with high work demands. Finally, the next sub-section will demonstrate Path 3 located in the theoretical framework that considers the extent to which the two

streams of resources are conducive to employees' performance, and thus of direct benefit to the organisation.

3.2.3.3 Work resources on employees' job performance

Employees' job performance as an organisational outcome is a focal point in HRM and WLB research (Lu and Cooper, 2015). The effect of work resources, WLBPPs and WLB on employees' performance can be explained by Social exchange theory. Under the employment relationship, there are mainly two types of labour exchanges, economic and social exchanges to be considered. The economic exchange can be explained by Akerlof's (1982) gift exchange theory. He views employment contract as a "partial gift exchange" and claims that some employers are willing to pay employees over the market-clearing wage, and in return they expect workers to supply more effort to reflect the extra pay. In terms of social exchange, while there are different perspectives from anthropology, social psychology and sociology when analysing the social exchange process, it is agreed that social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976). Work-life studies (Kelliher and Anderson, 2009; Scandura and Lankau, 1997) generally draw upon Blau's (1964) sociological views to explain employees' and their managers' actions in terms of work-life supports. This is mainly because the delivery of work-life resources (i.e. WLBPPs and WLBC) is more likely a non-financial rewarding process; it refers to interpersonal interactions which are broader than the economic exchange drawn in the labour contract. As Blau (1964) indicates these interactions are usually seen as a two-sided, contingent and mutually rewarding, process between social objects. When being treated favourably by others, employees feel obliged to respond in kind through positive attitudes or behaviours toward the origins of this support. By contrast, employees who are poorly treated tend to reduce

or end their positive attitudes and behaviours and may adopt negative ones in the workplace.

Setting such a reciprocal norm into work-life management, employees who perceive there to be appropriate support (e.g. managerial approval of WLBPPs) would feel an obligation to respond in kind with a positive attitude and behaviour compared to those who were not offered appropriate support. Consequently, obtaining a social resource may be associated with higher effective commitment (a type of social exchange) and better attitudes toward work. In the long run, employees tend to be loyal and easier to retain (Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Chou and Cheung, 2013; Masterson and Hoobler 2015). Such work-life benefits, resulting from either formalised policies or informal social, interpersonal support, enhance organisational effectiveness and add competitive advantages. This also forms the rationale to encourage the organisation to initiate and develop WLBPPs within their HR function.

There are several questionable points about this assumption of reciprocity. First, the resource here is understood as “an ability, possession, or another attribute of an actor giving him the capacity to reward (or punish) another specific actor. Any ability possessed by an individual is a resource in relations with other persons who value it.” (Emerson, 1976: 347-348). The concept of value is therefore subjective, based on the individual's perception. If these resources are not perceived as valued resources by the receiver, employees, the win-win situation derived from the social exchange may not occur as expected. Secondly, in order to compensate the ‘favour’, employees who perceive certain sources might extend additional work effort on a discretionary basis or make a concession in pay and promotion opportunities (Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Kelliher and Anderson,

2010). Fleetwood (2007b) criticises the so-called ‘reciprocal effect’ as ‘Moral coercion’. The reciprocity probably contributes to employees’ performance but may invisibly engage employees with working longer, allowing the employer to pay relatively lower wages. In this respect, the seemingly supportive resources can act to be quasi-best practice rather than the best practice.

3.3 Employees’ work-life balance and their job performance

This section critically demonstrates Path 4 located in the theoretical framework – the relationship between employees’ WLB and its focal work-related outcome, job performance. Employees’ work-life experiences can have an effect on their work behaviour. Where resource allocation at work helps employees balance their work and life, then positive relationships may be found in their behaviour at work such as less absence and better performance (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). The positive link can be explained from the perspectives of both employees and the organisation.

At the individual level, according to the COR model, employees will seek to conserve the resources, that they feel they need to keep, protect and build the WLB. Otherwise, the potential or actual loss of resources which detract from a WLB might cause employees stress, with subsequent detrimental effects on their effective functioning at work, such as job performance. Conversely, the feeling of experiencing enrichment and balance will cushion individuals from stress and lead to better performance. In addition, sustaining a balanced work and life to some extent reflects an employees’ capacity and skills such as time management, emotional intelligence and dealing with multiple works and life demands. These skills can be transferrable and equip the employee to be a high performer (ibid.).

From the organisational point of view, WLB issues can be seen as one of the important facets involved in employees' wellbeing. Considering employees' wellbeing rather than merely performance within the HRM system is a mutual gain approach to reconcile the business case and social case and enhance organisational effectiveness and sustainability (Guest 2017). Attitude-behaviour theory (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) explains the formation of individuals' work attitudes that contribute to shaping their intentions and behaviours. According to this theory, employees' experience (and perception) of WLB may create a positive response such as affective commitment, and this favourable attitude leads to work behaviours that promote their contributions to their organisation (Restubog et al., 2006).

The overall work-life status is not necessary to trigger bad or poor performance outcomes in the workplace. This can be argued in terms of external business pressures, internal performance pressure and the nature of the employment relationship. The backdrop of globalisation and external market competitions provide both opportunities and challenges for business and workforce development. Crucially, business pressures may shift into various tangible and intangible work demands flowing from the employer towards the employees. Employers have the managerial prerogative to tailor the employees' working targets and workload to meet business demands, with only a secondary concern for employee's actual demands. Employees who work under the performance-oriented HRM system may adapt to the demanding work and maintain or even improve their performance regardless of their WLB (White et al., 2003). As the performance attainment can largely determine pay, career training and development, unless the imbalance is too acute to reconcile, employees are less likely to free up time and energy for their personal and family commitments. Besides, to date, with widespread unitary management and

marginalised trade unionism, employees are more likely to be forced tolerate employers' adjustments with the reduction of extra work commitments, instead of bargaining for resources to relieve work pressures and secure WLB (Fleetwood, 2007b). As a consequence, it is problematic to conclude the positive theoretical link between employees' WLB and job performance. This controversy may rationalise that little direct link is found in employees' WLB and job performance (Beauregard and Henry, 2009).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the theoretical framework to be used in this study, which will guide the research into the WLB issues facing Chinese employees, focusing on their work demands and resources, and examining the associations between WLB and job performance. However, the theoretical framework needs to be critically reviewed and cautiously applied to the empirical study in the context of China.

Having specified the research framework and examined the related theories, the "dual path" assumption posited by the JD-R model was critically highlighted to explain Path 1 and 2 located in the framework, where the resource depletion and motivation coexist for employees at work. Generally, work demands tend to lead work-life imbalance. However, when employees perceive resourceful elements (e.g. a pay rise and sense of achievement) may arise from the demands, their overall work-life satisfaction might be improved. With WLBPPs and, significantly, the related WLBC constructed by supports within the organisation, employees may also be able to improve their WLB. Nevertheless, there are problems associated with the extent to which these resources are available to generate these motivational effects. The positive link between WLBPPs and WLB can be challenged when formalised WLBPPs are implemented informally from the perspective

of the 'business case', 'institutional case' and 'social case'; the 'business case' and managerial informality may impede the WLBC acting as motivational resources.

An employees' job performance, as an organisational outcome, is the focal point in HRM and WLB research (Guest, 2017; Lu and Cooper, 2015). The other parts of the research framework (Paths 3 and 4) is included to explore the association of WLB and work resources with job performance. Based on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), employees who perceive there to be work resources tend to feel an obligation to respond in kind with a positive attitude and behaviour, such as through improving performance. However, this raises the question of whether this is really reciprocity. Employees probably need to work longer and accept pay or career consequences to gain the "goodwill" from the employer or manager. In addition, Path 4 – the relationship between employees' WLB and job performance can be theoretically explained from the individual level and the organisational level. There is a failure to identify a conclusive positive relationship in the extant literature probably because such factors like external business pressures, internal performance pressure and managerial relation force employees to maintain levels of performance while tolerating a poor WLB.

The theoretical framework contributes to framing the methodological approach and the structure of research findings, with each path representing an inter-relationship of variables which can be examined. It is noted in the chapter that the models and theories used to construct the paths may be insufficient when interpreting these complex and even controversial inter-relationships. This can be attributed to the complex and dynamic nature of WLB issues, as was highlighted in the multi-layered conceptual framework for WLB discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, in the under-researched Chinese

context, applying adapted Anglo-American conceptual/analytical models may not have adequate explanatory power (Quer et al., 2007). Given these issues, this research attempts to frame a mixed methodological approach, which involves both quantitative methods to identify the inter-relationships shown in the framework, and qualitative methods to try and explain these causalities in depth. WLB researchers have been calling for the adoption of a mixed methodology, rather than continue relying on the quantitative tradition (e.g. Kalliath and Brough, 2008; Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Putnik et al., 2018). The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches will helpfully provide a robust approach to contextualise and deepen understanding of under-researched Chinese WLB issues. This will be covered in the following methodology chapter (Chapter 5).

Last but not least, considering the theoretical framework is mainly derived from Anglo-American research where the models and theories used that have not been fully examined in a non-western context, particularly the JD-R model, there are two concerns to be noted. First, while the JD-R model is prevalent in Anglo-American and European work-life research, it has yet to be fully examined in a non-western context. The adoption of the model in this research not only provides a justification for employing the theory in the Chinese context but also contributes to the empirical implication of the JD-R model in less researched countries such as China. Secondly, this framework may or may not be applicable to adopt in China because of the enormous context heterogeneity (e.g. Lu and Cooper, 2015; Coffey et al., 2009). The scale of this heterogeneity is examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Work-Life Balance in China

4.0 Introduction

WLB remains under-researched within HRM in the Chinese context, even though it is argued that work intensification and scant work-life related benefits severely challenge employees' WLB (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). As the work-life issues vary from national context, the dominated perspective of WLB originated from Anglo-American research may not be adequate to understand work-life issues in China (e.g. Ling and Powell, 2001; Fleetwood, 2007a; Cooke, 2013). China's unique economic, institutional and cultural characteristics provide a fertile research ground for examining WLB issues, to redefine the WLB discourse and add a refinement on existing work-life/work-family theories (Ling and Powell, 2001).

Prior to defining the research questions and strategy, this chapter seeks to review WLB issues at the national and organisational level to contribute to an understanding of WLB issues in China. It outlines the external work-life environment at a macro level in section 4.1, before drawing attention to the work demands and resources at the organisational level in section 4.2. The chapter examines the socially constructed meaning of WLB in line with the conceptual framework developed in chapter 2; and the relationships between work demands and resources, and WLB based upon the theoretical framework developed in chapter 3. This helps to demonstrate the validity of the theoretical framework and complete the formulation of the proposed research questions to be addressed through the research design in the next chapter. Notably, an attempt is made to clarify the largely under-researched work practices and contextual support and to critically identify the relationship between management's formal application of WLB policies and practices, and the reality experienced by the employee.

4.1 Work-life interface at the national level

A limited number of research studies have dipped into ‘Greater China’, primarily taking Hong Kong and Taiwan as samples, and mainly focusing on WLB from a cross-cultural perspective (Lu and Cooper 2015). However, WLB on the Chinese mainland remains largely absent from HRM studies. As the Chinese context varies from the Anglo-American context in its political, economic, cultural, and social conditions, this section will use Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault’s (2017) framework that analyses the work-life issues at the national level to scope the Chinese work-life interface from structural (e.g. economic, legal and institutional, social and demographic factors) and cultural (e.g. Chinese work values) dimensions. The aim is to provide the background to understand Chinese employees’ WLB perceptions and situations and shed light on work demands and resources provided at the organisational level in the subsequent sections.

4.1.1 Economic factors influence on Chinese employees’ WLB

4.1.1.1 Economic development

Within a single economy, macro-economic growth and development have had a mixed influence on employees’ work-life experiences. On the one hand, an economic recession may bring about time-based and strain-based work-life conflict, with intensified workloads, exponential job insecurity and precarious employment arising from austerity (Gregory et al., 2013). In such a situation, WLB would not be the policy priority or part of the mainstream discourse. On the other hand, although an expanding economy and heightened global competition may bring employees material rewards that benefit the work-life quality, it may also be associated with work intensification including long working hours and work overload (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017). The Chinese situation follows the second logic.

China’s economic development affects the employees’ work-life experience in two

competing directions. China has undergone rapid economic transformation and marketisation and social modernisation since the government's decision in 1978 to pursue economic reform and open the country up to international markets (Cooke, 2005). In the recent decade, there has been a slowdown in economic growth, although China was less impacted by the financial crisis in 2008 and the employment situation remains relatively stable. Following unprecedented economic development in past decades, jobs became more abundant and better paid. Employees' financial needs and material lives have gradually improved which, it can be argued, established the instrumental basis of their WLB. Based on expanded economic freedom, individuals tend to live better in line with their personal preferences (Russel and Ross, 2008). However, market competition at the heart of economic development has increased overall work demands and led to work intensification, which manifests as widespread overtime, overloaded work, and performance-related pay/bonuses, job insecurity and frequent business trips. The growing unpredictability of work during the night, weekends and holiday times, means employees no longer have enough time and energy to spend in their non-work domain (Trefalt et al., 2013).

Chinese employees are forced to tolerate various high work demands to a large extent due to job insecurity. Unlike the Planned Economy (1946-1978) when there was guaranteed permanent employment ('iron rice bowl') and the equal distribution of wage and benefits, in the competitive Market-based economy era (1979 onwards), the deregulation of employment has accompanied the marketisation process. Thus, with the reductions in permanent employment and employees' benefits, especially in the public sector and SOEs (State-owned enterprises), a large number of Chinese employees have become less secure in employment (Xiao and Cooke, 2012) and 'the majority have accepted this life change without radical forms of protests' (Blecher, 2010:94). Employees realise that they may

face career consequences, such as lower rates of promotion or even redundancy if their performance is not satisfactory. Job insecurity overwhelmingly forces them to prioritise work, bearing such high work demands in silence.

4.1.1.2 Unbalanced economic development and labour migration

The unbalanced and unequal regional economic development (i.e. urban and rural areas, coastal and inland regions) remains a big issue, which means Chinese employees experience work-life resources unevenly due to the policy priority and the market mechanism (Bao et al., 2002). First, the strategy of China's economic development is progressive. The agenda of 'coordination of regional economic development'⁴ highlights that eastern and southern coastal regions were allocated the role of pioneering development. Consequently, compared to interior provinces, coastal regions were offered more economic resources to improve social development, ecological construction, technology innovation and people's livelihoods. Secondly, the role of the market mechanism has been to widen the economic imbalance between regions. The coastal regions are equipped with a quality labour force and management and are able to attract high-quality resources to develop the regional economy. For example, foreign direct investment (FDI) is concentrated around the eastern and southern coastal regions due to the policy, transport and workforce advantages (ibid.). As a result, the imbalance in regional economic development has led to the labour migration, with people tending to migrate to the urban and coastal areas to work, which brings benefits and risks to individuals' work-life balance.

⁴ After the reforms and opening up of the Chinese economy, the CPC recognized the need to coordinate the development of regional economies and started to implement the overall regional development strategies. These included: encouraging the primary development of the eastern region; promoting the development of the western region; rejuvenating the northeast traditional industrial bases and promoting the rise of the central region to enter the new era of regional economic coordination.

With this development dividend, employees working in coastal cities have more opportunities to use beneficial resources in terms of social welfare, employment, and education. This makes it easier for employees to fulfil their financial, career, and welfare ambitions. The attraction of financial security and personal fulfilment encourage hundreds of millions to migrate to coastal areas for a better life (Li and Tang, 2002). However, this migratory process mostly works to push up the already-high living costs in the coastal urban areas thus fueling problems with WLB. The higher average salaries and benefits in the coastal areas are more likely to be associated with high and unpredictable work demands due to higher marketisation pressures. Accordingly, employees who work in the developed coastal areas are more likely to experience an overload of (work) demands over resources which squeezes their abilities to balance work and life. As the China Urban Competitiveness Report (2016) points out, with the process of urbanisation, resources are too scarce to meet the demands of the rapid swelling populations. The urban areas, especially those on the coast, increasingly suffer from problems like inadequate public services, traffic congestion and pollution, and these frustrate employees' health, work and life quality.

An additional legal issue facing these migrants is that better job opportunities, welfare, and some public utilities and services available in the developed regions are less used under the constraints of the 'Hukou'⁵ system (Household Registration System). The Hukou system was developed as a tool to inhibit mobility between the countryside and

⁵ Chinese migration status relates to "Hukou", household registration status that is regarded as a "Chinese internal passport system". A registration identity determined according to one's parents' Hukou (which is usually based on where one's parents originated) and is basically divided into two types, urban Hukou and rural Hukou. Different Hukou are affiliated with different recognition and benefits a person is entitled to, notably it is linked to locally financed social security and public services. This can often result in discrimination against migrants, as only a few can change their Hukou status. The motivations driving people migrating from interior to coastal regions, from the rural to the urban areas relate to securing resources and opportunities available in employment, education, business and a higher standard of living.

the cities to increase government control and retains some influence today (Cooke, 2005). Without a local Hukou registration, migrants face difficulties in accessing documented employment, social security and public services resources in the city they are working compared to the local (registered) inhabitants. Such geo-discrimination and welfare exclusion, such as barriers to children accessing schools, restrict migrants' efficacy to balance their work and life.

Moreover, macro-level labour migration can be combined with micro-level work-family separation. Although this mobility does not affect the economic links between family members, caring arrangements between generations can be constrained and weakened. For instance, for migrants, the ongoing separation of working couples from the wider family network can create additional childcare problems (and costs) impacting on their WLB compared with local residents (Sheldon and Sanders, 2016). The increases of return migration to the central inland regions since 2000 may reflect, to some extent, migrant worker responses to work-life conflict in the economically developed cities.

4.1.2 Legal and institutional factors influencing Chinese employees' WLB

While employees' WLB is yet to be legitimised as an explicit right in China, the current legal and institutional environments play an influential role in influencing their WLB perceptions and safeguarding their WLB. This section identifies two main country-level structural factors that affect Chinese employees' WLB including legal regulation and policy interventions, and the institutional environments where the regulations and policies are designed and implemented. This is followed by a critical review of the three institutions, the state, the employer and union that play important roles in constructing the formalised work-life management context.

4.1.2.1 Legal regulation and policy interventions affecting Chinese employees' WLB

China's legal regulation and policy interventions shape employees' WLB in several ways. They are mainly derived from China's laws, which regulate working hours, leave entitlements (e.g. annual leave, festivals⁶) and the social security system. Provisions especially refer to supporting women in employment (e.g. maternity leave⁷, breastfeeding leave⁸). Details for each of the regulations and provisions are outlined in the following sections.

(1) Working hours regulations

The regulation of working hours is stipulated in labour law, identifying that weekly working hours are limited to 40 hours, and no more than 44 hours per week⁹ and that overtime is generally limited up to 1 hour per day but may be longer in some circumstances. This legislation is aimed at reducing hours at work and the possible work-life conflict of high working hours. Data reported in the China Labour Statistical Yearbook (2016) indicate Chinese employees work 45.5 hours per week on average, and the data also indicate hours have been increasing year by year. Researchers also point out that actual working hours may be longer (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). It is common that while

⁶ Paid annual leave (Article 45, Chapter 4, Labour Law 2008). Employees who have been working for a consecutive period of more than one year shall be entitled to paid annual leave. The duration of the annual leave entitlement is (a) 5 days for employees who have accumulatively worked for 1–10 years; (b) 10 days for employees who have accumulatively worked for 10–20 years; and (c) 15 days for employees who have accumulatively worked for more than 20 years. Employers who offer more vacation time are legally obligated to grant it. Every worker is also entitled to 11 paid public holidays.

⁷ Maternity leave (Article 62, Chapter 4, Labour Law of 2008). It is stipulated at the national level that a female employee who gives birth shall have 98 days of maternity leave. Municipal or provincial regulations may provide female employees with an additional 30–90 days of maternity leave.

⁸ Breastfeeding leave (Article 9, Provisions on women employment support 2012). The employer shall arrange one hour of breastfeeding time each working day for female employees during their breastfeeding period, which ends when their babies reach one year old. In the event of multiple births, the female employee shall be entitled to an additional hour of breastfeeding time for each additional baby.

⁹ Working hours regulation (WHR) (Article 36, Labour Law 2008) The employer shall operate a working hour system wherein employees shall work for no more than eight hours a day and no more than 44 hours a week on the average.

the working hours regulation is written into the employment contract, employees are often required to informally work additional hours to keep on top of workload and meet business demands. Thus, overtime in excess of contractual and legally regulated working hours is an established norm in all sectors and organisations in China (Kim and Chung, 2016). Unlike western countries, flexible working patterns are not facilitated in the legal system, and full-time work is the dominant working pattern (Liu et al., 2008). Part-time, temporary and fixed-term working patterns only exist when used for informal employment on a temporary basis to meet business needs. Temporary work is segregated and associated with weaker working conditions and far fewer employment and social security rights (Liu et al., 2008).

(2) Leave entitlements.

The second area of work-life regulation is leave entitlement. Leave is a fundamental employee right, to alleviate employees' high work demands and balance their work and life (Foster and Ren, 2015). In China, leave entitlements are fully regulated at the national legal and municipal or provincial regulatory levels; creative leave initiatives are not prevalent at the organisational level (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). According to the Labour Law of the PRC 2008 and relevant Decrees of the state, Chinese employees are entitled to have statutory weekend breaks (Article 38), paid annual leave (Article 45), festivals and holidays (Article 40), maternity leave and breaks (Article 62 and 63, the duration and pay can vary from municipal or provincial regulations) sick leave (Article 23, the duration and pay can vary from municipal or provincial regulations), marriage leave (Article 51 the duration can vary from municipal or provincial regulations). In addition, paternity and bereavement leaves are not set at the national legal level but in the municipal or provincial regulation. The maternity, sick, paternity and bereavement leaves are granted by the employer/manager under certain conditions and circumstances. Aside from those

mentioned above, there are no other parental leave rights that employers have to observe or are regulated. Employers are obliged, where reasonable, to grant all these forms of leave to employees, but specific days and timing of leave can vary between different provinces and regions, occupations, job level. The wording of the regulations, such as 'reasonable', allows the employer to exercise their prerogative in terms of implementation. Under these conditions, where the long working hours culture remains the norm, and flexible working patterns and practices are unavailable, these leave entitlements appear to be the most pragmatic means for most of the Chinese employees to reconcile their work and life (Liu et al., 2008).

There are explicit obstacles to enforcing the right to take leave. The taking of leave entitlement is rare in the Chinese workplace especially in the private sector due to business pressures. For instance, some employees hesitate to request leave for fear of performance-related pay deductions or being considered as less-committed employees. Although maternity leave is far more secure in most sectors and companies, the costs of rights-related wellbeing (e.g. statutory leave duration, company-dominated maternity insurance, and subsequent breastfeeding leave) is often perceived to be at the expense of career development. Some female employees might face a job-transfer, pay cut and career interruption after coming back from maternity leave (ibid.). Therefore, such potential risks weaken the enforcement and effectiveness of leave, which, in turn, impacts on employees' WLB.

(3) The social security system.

The third legitimised guarantee for employees' WLB is in the area of social welfare. Chinese social welfare is largely determined by the social security system which consists of five social insurances (i.e. pensions, unemployment, health, work-related injury and

maternity) and one mandatory housing provident fund, known as “five insurance and one fund”. In line with the development of the market-based economy, China has gradually established an array of relatively systematic and comprehensive social security system issued in China’s Social Insurance Law 2011. The law requires both employers and employees to contribute to “five insurances” programme. All these costs are shared by government, enterprises and individuals on the certain basis of proportions respectively, among which employers must be responsible for the enrolment of each employee (especially full-time) in “five insurance” programme. While the housing fund is not officially part of the social insurance system stipulated in the Law, it is often grouped together with the five insurance programs since it functions in a similar manner, with benefits funded through contributions paid by employers and their employees. These areas have the scope to provide employees with social support and facilitate their WLB materially and psychologically. The problematic point lies in whether enterprises strictly implement these provisions to guarantee that all (legally) entitled employees are covered. Some employers only enrol the key or “guanxi” employees in the social insurance system (Rickne, 2013). The unequal social resource distribution diminishes the harmonious social construction and individual work-life balance overall.

(4) Provisions on women employment support.

In both Civil and Labour Law of the PRC, there are plenty of relevant provisions to promote gender equality and strengthen Chinese female employment. Females have the right to equal employment¹⁰; both men and women have obligations to undertake family responsibility; contributions to the household division of labour made by family members

¹⁰ Women should enjoy equal rights of employment (Article 12, Labour Law 2008).

should be recognised¹¹; the law also prohibits termination of employment of female employees in cases of pregnancy, labour and lactation; and females employees are entitled to leave in cases of maternity, breastfeeding, miscarriage and abortion¹². This aims of these social policy provisions on gender equality are intended to offer female employees opportunities for them to pursue their careers without compromising their gender role in the workplace (Woodhams et al., 2015). Given that China has the highest female employment rates in the world with women accounting for 43.5% of China's labour force (Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

However, as with the application of working hours regulations, there is probably a gap between policy provisions on gender equality in practice in the workplace. The policy focus is more likely on job quantity (creation) rather than job quality (measured by job security, wage level, welfare provision, equality.). The majority of women are in employment but segregated into low-paid sectors and occupations, which entrench patterns of pay inequality (Woodhams et al., 2015). There are two main trends in female employment since China's economic reforms: the feminisation of informal sector employment and the devaluation of female-dominant occupations (Tong, 2016). Taking part-time work as an example, it is generally perceived that temporary hourly work is focused upon an oral contract for rural migrants and laid-off or unemployed urban residents (Liu et al., 2008). Also, gender inequality may often occur in recruitment as well as career advancement due to employers' concerns about the potential additional labour costs in relation to maternity leave and family care. Due to the scarcity of specific

¹¹ Women shall enjoy equal civil rights with men (Article 105, The Civil law of the PRC 2017).

¹² Female employees receive 98 days of maternity leave; Female employees who have had a miscarriage less than 4 months of pregnancy will entitle 15 days; if they have an abortion after 4 months of pregnancy, they will entitle 42 days. For female employees who breastfeed their baby (until one y/o), the employer shall not extend the working hours or arrange night work; shall arrange one hour of breastfeeding time for the employee during lactation during the working hours of each day. (Article 7 and 9, Provisions on women employment support 2012).

WLBPPs, organisations may not be able to afford costs on employees' non-work costs. Employees rarely have opportunities to gain external assistance outside of their home to fulfil with their family responsibilities (ibid.).

The regulations and provisions discussed above mainly reflect legislation and are the government's endeavours to protect employees' work-life rights through legal regulation. However, despite legislation and the government's attempts to influence the political agenda, this does not ensure employees' WLB is safeguarded. This is because enforcement is only possible with the support of a sound institutional environment: where the government, the employer and union work together to construct and formalise policy implementation (Cooke, 2013). The next section will identify the roles of the three key institutions in formulating the Chinese institutional environment.

4.1.2.2 The role of critical institutions on Chinese employees' WLB

(1) The government

The government is the party which takes primary responsibility for the institutional context by constructing labour regulations, the social welfare system and all policies for working people, as well as helping organisations survive and thrive in the current global economic competition (Lu, 2016). Li and Sun (2017:556) state "China features a one-party political monopoly; democracy and transparency are not integral to the Chinese political and economic system." The sole ruling party, the CPC plays a dominant role in designing and promulgating labour legislation and social policy to secure and promote workforce development and stability. The legislation and policy regulated by the government not only shape people's WLB perceptions and experiences but also guide and control employers' behaviour.

In China, the deepening of the market-driven economy has been accompanied by the development of a legislative framework to regulate employment relationships (Cooke 2005). During the 1980s and 1990s, the CPC embraced strong policy preferences for labour market deregulation. In this environment, employers unilaterally control their firms' destinies and adopt their preferred work practices with limited scope for less employee involvement and participation and the marginalisation of the trade union. Thus, bypassing labour regulations, unequal wealth and income distribution threatened employees' WLB and wider social harmony. Not only was employee dissatisfaction increasing as measured by increasing labour turnover rates in more developed economic areas, but strikes and other forms of work protest emerged (ibid.).

China's government subsequently introduced a broad agenda and targeted measures to regulate labour markets in a fair and pluralistic way including: the Labour Law 2008, Employment Contract Law 2008 and Trade Union Law 2001. These laws formally institutionalise the employment contract and mainly determine working hours and leave as well as social benefits (e.g. social insurance and welfare). This indicates the government may not only safeguard employees' work-life rights but send a signal to employers that employees' non-work issues are worth consideration. Furthermore, the Chinese governmental regime advocates a 'harmonious society'¹³ to reconcile the tensions between economic growth and large income and wealth inequalities. The Party's official position is to 'build harmonious labour relations'¹⁴ with the close alignment of

¹³ At the Sixth Plenum of the Sixteenth CCP Central Committee on 11th October 2006, the detailed report 'A Resolution on the Major Issues Concerning the Building of a Socialist Harmonious Society' officially states that "social harmony is the intrinsic nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics and an important guarantee of the country's prosperity, the nation's rejuvenation, and the people's happiness."

¹⁴ Harmonious employment relations, as a direct manifestation of respect for labour, is constructed in the frame of the "construction of harmonious society". The CPC proposes "building a socialist harmonious society" focusing on four principles: a comprehensive implementation of respecting labour, respecting

social, corporate and employees' interests and an emphasis on employees' representative and participation. This may create a channel for employee voices in relation to their WLB and influence organisational work-life management.

While legal safeguards have been strengthened, gradually, legislative enforcement is relatively weak (Cooke, 2005). This will undermine WLB being progressed at the national level. Critically, China has been undergoing a rapid process of marketisation where social welfare is secondary to economic development. Thus, legislation and policy-making prioritises developing the nation's economy, rather than protecting employees (Lu, 2016). Furthermore, implementation is even more problematic at the local regulative level. Due to the heterogeneity of regions and ownership forms, there are highly diversified institutional environments across regions in China (Li and Sun, 2017). The policies promulgated at the central level can be revised by the local governments¹⁵ to suit local conditions. That is, local governments possess a significant amount of autonomy and discretion in interpreting and reformulating national regulations and policies for the purpose of "best fit". However, Cooke (2013) argues the problem lying in such a policy reshaping process is that the local authority and the main local employers, who significantly contribute to local GDP, may interact subtly to achieve the local government's parochial political and economic goals, such that the national approach or promoted channels to improve the employees' voice and WLB is not endorsed. As the

knowledge, respecting talent and creativity, and enhancing the creativity of the whole society; to properly coordinate the interests of all relations, properly handle contradictions among the people; strengthen social construction and management, social management system innovation; and sound working mechanisms to maintain social stability.

¹⁵ According to the Constitution of the PRC, local government refers to the government at the sub-national level. It is divided into four levels: provincial, municipal, county and town. While the national constitution states that China is a unitary system. In reality, there are great discrepancies in almost every policy area between local policy implementation and the centre's policy mandates mainly due to the regional heterogeneity.

famous Chinese proverb says, “Where there is a policy, there is a countermeasure”. It means even though there is policy from the top design, the employer may have the strategy from the bottom to avoid the negative impact of the policy on them. Consequently, the sub-institutional environment at the organisational level appears significant in shaping employees' WLB in China.

(2) The employer

The application of employer prerogatives can distort the statutory regulation of employment relationships and directly influence employees' work-life experiences. In China, since the state's roles of economic manager and the employer have been weakened through marketisation, employers in increasingly diverse forms of ownership are losing their dependence on the state. Generally, firms are divided into state-owned and private-owned employers (Cooke, 2005). The former remains a key part of China's economic system and tend to be more affiliated with the state, despite the fact that they possess absolute operational autonomy in managing employees. SOEs are expected to act as a model in terms of implementing labour legislation, promoting employment stability and harmony, and investment in human capital development. POEs (Privately owned enterprises) have less political responsibility and focus more on economic efficacy, so that these employers may have greater freedom to loosen their legal responsibilities, with obligations primarily to control the labour costs and expand their profits.

To improve efficiency and profitability, employers have strived to establish a market-oriented employment system by developing their human resource function from the personnel management tradition. Driven by the fundamental goal of profit-maximising, employment and HRM practices are primarily focused on business needs. The Chinese labour market is still viewed as a buyer's market, full of cheap labour that provides a

plausible reason for employers to overlook employees' work-life needs. While some large POEs are learning from MNCs to address employees' work-life issues for talent attraction and retention, generally the WLB discourse remains underdeveloped from the perspectives of the employers.

(3) The trade union

Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault (2017) propose that unions' density and collective bargaining coverage are considered to indicate unions' effect on facilitating employees' WLB. In terms of Chinese union density, autonomous unionism is illegal; only the ACFTU (All-China Federation of Trade Union) affiliated to the CPC (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China) is a legitimate conduit for the employees' voice at national and local levels (Cooke, 2005). Under the unitary management and affiliated status, the union's substantive function appears to be marginalised. Chinese unionism is disconnected from collective bargaining, and any form of industrial action is unacceptable due to the resultant social risk. Therefore, constraints on union power provide limited opportunities for employees to raise their work-life needs and acquire organisational resources through bilateral channels. Consequently, Chinese unions are peripheral to the regulation of the employment relationship, promoting instead social and service-supported functions for employees' welfare and workplace culture building (Brewster, 2007). For example, the trade union funds can be used for collective welfare expenditure including holidays, members' birthdays, weddings and funerals, and retirement expenses.

To summarise, the three roles of key institutions construct the institutional context in which employees' work-life experiences are embedded. However, the enforcement of legal and political provisions highlights potential challenges. The unitary nature of the employment relationship enables employers to claim justifiable business grounds to

marginalise employees' work-life needs. Both the dependent status of Chinese unions and the non-existence of collective bargaining indicate the weak function of Chinese unions in terms of promoting employees' wellbeing and WLB. The next section now reviews current regulation and policy interventions directly related to Chinese employees' WLB.

4.1.3 The influence of social and demographic factors on Chinese employees' WLB

Social and demographic dynamics influence individuals' work-life perceptions and experiences. Two of the most discussed aspects examined in WLB research are family responsibilities and changing gender perspectives (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017). Generally, the more family responsibilities employees are undertaking, the more work-life conflict they tend to experience, according to the conflict model and empirical research findings (e.g. Greenhuas and Beutell, 1985). According to arguments constructed around gendered social roles, women are regarded as more vulnerable and more likely to suffer work-life conflict (Guttek et al., 1991). This section will identify the impact of social and family roles on employees' work and life priorities and arrangements.

4.1.3.1 Demographic changes and family responsibilities

Since the reform and opening-up policy of 1979, Chinese demographic changes include postponing the age of marriage and first child, a declining birth rate and smaller family size, and increasing life expectancy, and family structures converging towards the nuclear family. This dominant family mode significantly influences employees' work-life experiences with childcare and elderly care responsibilities. First, and similar to most western findings, the greatest imbalance between work and life for Chinese employees results from combining childcare and work (Liu et al., 2008). Most employees encounter a clash between career advancement and childbearing. They are ambitious to develop

their careers while young adults but may have to balance this against priorities to undertake or pay for childcare and education.

The Chinese dynamic of childcare responsibility is heavily policy-driven. Since the one-child policy strictly enacted between 1980-2015, most Chinese couples were only allowed to have one child. The shrinking family size may have reduced family (childcare) demands but did not necessarily lead to an improved WLB. Since there is no provision of public nurseries, and only a limited number of childcare centres and quality educational resources in China, childcare, particularly for preschool children becomes a family/individual responsibility (ibid.). Both couples, as well as extended families, would wholeheartedly seek to provide quality living conditions and educational support for the only child (Settles et al., 2013). However, the 'Dedication of Love' requires a foundation of good quality caring time and financial sources.

In China, over 90% of couples are dual earners (Ling and Powell, 2001). It is difficult for them to secure adequate time and energy to perform both responsibilities in two places at once. While outsourcing childcare and household responsibilities (e.g. nursery and caregivers) are supposed to alleviate the working parents' dilemma, they are not common coping strategies for Chinese employees. This is due to the limited availability of such outsourcing services and their high fees, as well as the uneven quality of the commercialised assistance (Liu et al., 2008). Therefore, childcare from extended family, usually, parents or parents-in-law, is an effective and common way for the Chinese family to take a break from household chores and childcare and keep the dual earners focusing upon their work (Aaltio and Huang, 2007). Parents or parents-in-law offer substantial social and financial support. However, there are two main risks associated with such

‘grandparenting’. On the one hand, ageing grandparents’ health and energy may not guarantee childcare; and on the other, the spoiled and outdated style of grandparenting may lead to negative consequences for the child as intergenerational differences over parenting may elicit family disharmony (Lu, 2015).

These family responsibilities may exacerbate the pressure on working parents if a couple decides to have another baby under the current two-child policy, operated since 2016. The new policy allowing Chinese couples to have two children was proposed to help address the problem of an ageing society and future workforce reproduction in China. China’s labour market consists of over 900 million workers, of which approximately 66% are aged between 16 and 60 (China Labour Statistics Yearbook, 2016). In response to this, Chinese couples are encouraged to have two children. Correspondingly, both maternity and paternity leaves have been increased in most regions and provinces to facilitate the implementation of the two-child policy.

Nevertheless, the most recent official data show that the fertility rate fell to its lowest rate in the past 230 years, indicating the beginning of negative population growth (Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). This reflects the argument that having another baby is too expensive both in terms of time and money (Soho, 2019). The number of children is negatively associated with individuals’ overall work-life experience (Lu and Cooper, 2015). An additional child will bring a family more physical and psychological challenges, greater financial needs, and career segregation. It is difficult for employees to maintain their WLB with two children and minimise disruption to their work domain. Particularly for females, being allowed to have two children might push them into lower paid, and segregated employment as no employer is expected to accept another maternity leave

request. In addition, as family care is still the main elderly care mode in China, the current social security and welfare provision may not be able to adequately address ongoing demands for family-caring (Liu et al., 2008). Elderly care responsibility, therefore, has been increasingly shouldered by fewer family members, exacerbating WLB problems.

In terms of the gender perspective, while work-life issues pertain to both women and men in China (Lu, 2015), it is more problematic for women. The transformation of gender relations has been gradually shown in couples' social and family roles driven by labour protection, policy intervention and equality legislation. As a result, increasingly males are being involved in the labour division of household and care issues, and more women feel confident to approach the professional career ladder. However, Lewis et al. (2007) argue gendered ideology is still rooted and even serves to reinforce gender inequities in the workplace. This argument can be applied to China because women continue to provide a supporting role to men and act as primary caregiver at home (Lu et al., 2015b; Ren and Foster, 2011) reflecting the traditional 'gender order'. The dominant family responsibilities constrain the resources they can dedicate to paid work. While young unmarried females and females without children do not undertake too much family care, they still face significant work-life tensions arising primarily from their families' and wider social pressures. These pressures are based upon the ideology that works cannot be a means for women to postpone marriage and failure to marry leads to "leftover" women¹⁶ who are deemed to be socially unacceptable. The phenomenon of "leftover" women is claimed to be part of a resurgence of gender inequality in China (Fincher, 2016).

¹⁶ The derogatory term "leftover women" is widely used to describe an unmarried female over 27 years old. Even although not all these females are anxious about being 'left', they suffer the intense pressures from parents, relatives, friends and society to marry.

Notably, men's family demands are changing but remain largely neglected. Zhao et al. (2017b) find that in a current Chinese family, more males are willing to share the family issues with their partners, but even if 'their spirit is willing, the flesh is weak'. This may reflect both regulatory inadequacy and the influence of social stereotypes. In a conventional work stereotype, males working overtime for career development is taken for granted, and few opportunities are provided for them to modify their work to accommodate family needs. These deep-rooted gender roles socially impact on all employees' work-life priorities and arrangements. The low level of enforcement of paternity leave exemplifies the ignorance of males' work-life rights (Woodhams et al., 2015) and male employees yield to the role of breadwinner, even if plenty of fathers want to be involved in childcare. As Zhao et al. (2017b) specified in their research, Chinese male employees with egalitarian gender perspectives are also suffering severe levels of work-life imbalance.

4.1.4 Cultural factor influence on Chinese employees' WLB

Cross-cultural WLB research has increasingly highlighted that culture is a fundamental issue for WLB. Powell et al. (2009) examine culture-sensitivity in the work-family interface and argue that work-life theories should consider cultural sensitivity. Lu et al. (2015a) propose a generic framework linking culture with the work and family interface, arguing that culture may act to define the meaning and primacy of work and family and also act to moderate the constructions of WLB (e.g. antecedents, interventions and consequences). Chinese culture with Confucian roots is acknowledged to be different from the western cultural mainstream (ibid.). The Chinese work-life interface may be influenced by traditional cultural values such as the mutual influence of collectivism and

individualism, patriarchalism, Guanxi and filial piety¹⁷. This section will review how these cultural elements impact and shape employees' perceptions of WLB and their relevant behaviours. However, it should be born in mind that understanding work-life primacy and relationships merely from cultural perspectives may be problematic, considering people's WLB is influenced by other dominant factors (e.g. economic and institutional environment) as highlighted earlier in the chapter.

4.1.4.1 Embedded Collectivism and emerging Individualism

One of the significant dimensions considered in cross-cultural WLB research is Collectivism and Individualism (e.g. Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017; Powell et al., 2009). These two cultural perspectives it is argued, moderate employees' perceptions of WLB. The core rationales are that individualists emphasise individual independence and autonomy and are more motivated by their own goals; by contrast, collectivists appreciate interpersonal and social relationships (i.e. Guanxi in China) and pay more attention to the groups' needs (e.g. family, work team, community and organisation) over their own individual ambitions (Triandis, 2001). In contemporary China, the collectivism traditionally rooted in society seems to be gradually weakening by emerging individualism. Lu (2015) proposes the 'bicultural self' to describe contemporary Chinese people, encompassing two main components, the social-oriented and individual-oriented self. As a result, employees' perceptions of WLB can be complex and dynamic due to the intertwining influences of collectivism and individualism.

¹⁷ Filial piety is a virtue of respect for one's parents, elders, and ancestors. It is derived from Confucian and Chinese Buddhist ethics. Generally, filial piety ethically requires adult children to love, respect, support and take care of their parents, and engage in good conduct towards their parents and ancestors.

Collectivism can vary between different countries but commonly advocates the priority of collective (e.g. family and organisation) welfare and highlights harmony, diligent role performance and rigorous self-cultivation (Hofstede, 1980; Lu, 2015). Under the influence of collectivism, work-life balance in China is argued to be more about harmony (Chen, 2001). Lu et al. (2015) believe that Chinese happiness is an outcome of work going well. Work is a part of life that can be integrated with happiness. The employee's career success represents a family's honour and prosperity, as more work involvement is thought to gain economic, social and relational benefits for the whole family (Yang et al., 2000; Lu et al., 2015). For the sake of family interests, employees can voluntarily sacrifice their self-interests and enjoyment. The metaphor of 'family' can be extended to indicate the community and employing organisation. Within the organisation, collectivism is rooted in organisational culture and managerial teaching, where loyalty and commitment to organisations are often advocated (Lu et al., 2010). As a result, work dedication is a highly praised virtue and obligation and is, therefore, tolerated by the family (Lu, 2015). This is incongruent with the western individualist world where devotion to work is argued to be an individual right (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). The subtle and profound collectivistic culture may help to rationalise prioritising work and ameliorate any work-life conflict that may be caused by work dominating life. Consequently, it is argued that employees tend to 'accept work-life conflict as a matter of fact' (Cooke, 2013:130). This echoes the culture-sensitive perspective that employees who live and work in the collectivistic community may be less sensitive to work-life conflict and are less likely to express dissatisfaction or low commitment levels (Powell et al., 2009).

The individual orientation associated with western societies has been emerging following the process of globalisation, Chinese economic reforms, and the country's modernisation

process (Wong, 2001). Against this macro-level backdrop, contemporary Chinese employees tend to embrace individualist values such as self-reliance, independence, freedom of expression and the perusing of personal goals, particularly, it is argued, in the groups of white-collar employees and the younger generations (Coffery et al., 2009). When the collectivist values are shocked by idiocentric views, employees may no longer be able to accept work-life conflict resulting from work intensity and domination. This may result in a change in their WLB expectations, with WLC less readily tolerated, and the individual's WLB needs to be articulated. Thus, increasingly employees are more aware of their work-life rights, less deferential to patriarchal authority, and willing to request work-life benefits for themselves.

The perspective of the bicultural self among Chinese employees has been empirically tested and validated in the Taiwanese context (Lu, 2012). As Gao and Newman (2005: 15) comment in today's China, 'collectivistic and individualistic values may not be antagonisms but coexist in an individual as a parallel tendency.' Furthermore, Lu (2012) prioritise cultural values associated with the "bicultural self", finding "the pursuit of self-interest is legitimate after their social duties are fulfilled". As a result, due to the scarcity of WLB research in China overall, it leaves an interesting point for this research to examine how the Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB are shaped by collectivism and individualism.

4.1.4.2 Patriarchalism, Guanxi and Filial piety

Traditional Chinese culture adheres to Confucian values regarding filial piety and women's obedience to men, intended to create hierarchies in the home that produce harmony in society. It is argued that this produces an extremely patrilineal and patriarchal system that inhibits gender equality. It makes work-life balance issues gendered in

Chinese society. With Chairman Mao's advocacy of "women hold up half of the sky" (1949), the legal framework and social policies advocated equal gender rights in the political, economic, cultural, social and family domain. Since then both men and women are expected to be employed full-time, and men are expected to participate more actively in domestic life (Russell and Ross, 2008). Despite these changes, what remains largely unchanged is "the woman has been prescribed a role that is socially inferior to her man" (Cooke, 2013:100) and the representation of women in all aspects of public life is still relatively low (Russell and Ross, 2008). This may be attributable to the patriarchal values deeply embedded in Chinese society. Chinese women still subconsciously accept and undertake primary caring responsibilities and household duties (Lu et al., 2015a).

Guanxi is also featured as a prominent characteristic in Chinese society that influences social relationships and people management (Rowley and Cooke, 2014). Chen (2001) describes the essential components of guanxi as a focus on social connections that are defined by reciprocity, mutual obligation, a sense of goodwill and personal affection. Within the Chinese organisation, the mutual obligation and reciprocal nature of guanxi can contribute to maintaining the harmony of the in-group community (Wang and Seifert, 2017). Having close Guanxi with the manager may make it easier to gain career and work-life benefits (Goodall et al., 2007). Hence, Chinese people are used to devoting a substantial amount of time and energy to establish Guanxi, which they find respectable and helpful.

Filial piety is deep-rooted in Chinese society, which influentially impacts employees' perceptions of WLB. Filial piety is a virtue: love and respect for one's parents and ancestors. Its moral identity requires the younger generation to maintain a strong sense of responsibility and obligation to care for their elderly parents. It morally requires Chinese

people to stay connected to their families and fulfil family responsibilities. It can be used to explain the universality of the family care model in Chinese society and elderly care pressures on Chinese employees.

In summary, balancing people's work and life has become a critical issue in China against a backdrop of globalisation and social modernisation. Individuals' work-life perceptions and experiences are dynamically driven by macro-environment. The dynamic of rapid economic development and the developing institutional context fundamentally shape employees' work-life experiences. Moreover, the changing demographics and socio-cultural factors bring both family demands and may act to influence employees' perceptions significantly.

4.1.5 Conclusion: Understanding Chinese employees' work-life balance

Lu (2016), a Chinese work-life balance researcher, defines work as comprising formal full paid employment and typical work-related activities such as commuting and (after) work socialising. Life is defined as involving primarily family life and other forms of social participation, such as voluntary associations and leisure activities. Although work-life balance is less mentioned and defined as a concept in China, the literature review of the Chinese WLB context below indicates a degree of consensus over Chinese perceptions of WLB based upon an overall approach (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007).

Work and life are found to be complementary and integrated rather than conflictual and segmented in China (Yang et al. 2000; Yang, 2005; Lu, 2016). Work-life integration and enrichment can be attributed to economic and collectivistic perspectives. Chinese prioritise work for personal and family benefits. Work demands can ultimately bring financial and career benefits to them and their families. Financial rewards and job security

might be their balance indicators that offset time-based and strain-based imbalances from work leading to psychological satisfaction. The collectivistic values can also affect this, as working hard is more often interpreted as ‘possessing a good work ethic’, which may also secure management’s favour and recognition, and opportunities for career development as a means to address any work-life conflict.

These positive perceptions of work-life integration may be passively constructed. WLB researchers show little optimism for the work-life situation of Chinese employees (Kim and Chung, 2016). Even if Chinese employees start to become aware of and value WLB, both market pressures and competition continue to intensify work demands. As a result of heavy and unpredictable work demands, unenforced labour legislation and insufficient organisational resources to buffer the high work demands, with the mediation of cultural tradition, Chinese employees are essentially forced to get used to accepting an imbalance as the normality.

The understanding of WLB can also vary according to social-demographic factors in China. For example, younger and single people tend to have less WLC compared to those who are married with child- and elderly care responsibilities (Lu et al., 2009). Female employees may suffer more WLC (Ling and Powell, 2001). As for the job level, WLC affects employees in different jobs differently. Those employed in higher positions (grades) tend to have greater work responsibilities and pressures, which negatively impact on their WLB. Those in lower positions (grades) may prioritise material income to meet the financial needs of their family by working longer hours. Although this will reduce time in the home domain, it is likely to facilitate their WLB in the sense of financial and self-esteem satisfactions (ibid.). In terms of sectors and occupations, work intensification

is associated with professional and managerial workers in fast-growing and competitive sectors, such as IT, finance, consultancy and real estate. Employees who work in the public sector tend to experience fewer WLC due to their job content and the availability of employee wellbeing (Liu et al., 2008).

To summarise, contextualising WLB, through reviewing literature about the Chinese political, economic, legal, socio-demographic and cultural environment, provides important insights as to why WLB could be conceptualised and perceived differently in China compared to Anglo-American dominated studies. This, combined with the relative lack of research into WLB in China, leads to the following research question:

Research Question 1. What are the general perceptions and experiences of WLB among Chinese employees?

4.2 Work-life interface at the Chinese organisational level

The work-life interface should be contextualised at the organisational level. As employees' work and life arrangements are closely related to demands and resources at work, the childcare, eldercare and housework, singularly or collectively, were not found to be significant contributors to employees' WLB (Foster and Ren, 2015). This section will discuss the employees' WLB and its related factors at the level of the Chinese organisation.

4.2.1 Work-related demands of Chinese employees' WLB

Xiao and Cooke (2012: 13) summarise the significant antecedents that impact employees' work-life experience (shown in Table 3 below). The work-related demands contribute to increased workload and additional working hours for employees. With work intensification, employees hardly have sufficient family time or relaxed conditions to

enjoy their life. Most Chinese employees are found to be struggling to maintain a full-time job, which squeezes time and their energy with family and friends (ibid.). This appears to substantiate the negative links claimed between work demands and WLB for Chinese employees. Some evidence that supports this relationship can be found in the existing literature. For example, work intensification appears conjointly with high WFC, with the working time and workload reported as the main work-related demands for WLC in China (Lu et al., 2009; Siu, 2015).

**Table 3 The antecedents of work-life imbalance for Chinese employees
(Xiao and Cooke, 2012: 13)**

Work-related	Life/family-related
<p>Long working hours, often involving excessive and continuous overtime</p> <p>High-performance targets, making it very difficult to achieve targets during normal working hours, hence working unpaid overtime</p> <p>Market competition pressures leading to increased performance pressures and pace of work</p> <p>Extra workload due to staff shortages, vacancies left unfilled (sometimes deliberately by employers in order to save cost)</p> <p>Staff training or management meetings conducted outside of working hours</p> <p>Frequent business trips to open up new markets and for other business needs</p> <p>Workplace location far from employee residential areas and commercial centres causing inconvenience to employees' life</p>	<p>Long working hours and working in unsocial hours clashing with childcare commitment and social activities</p> <p>Business trips affecting childcare responsibility and family union time</p> <p>Having no spare time to find a spouse/partner</p>

Work demands of an unpredictable and stressful nature appear to be particularly challenging for Chinese employees' WLB. If additional work is predicted and arranged reasonably and constructively, employees may be able to plan their work and life, thereby

reducing the disruption to their work-life arrangements. Further, Chinese employees are always expected to work during non-working hours: after-work, for urgent meetings, and to undertake temporary work (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Employees have little opportunity to negotiate this but follow their line manager's instructions to complete the work demands on time. The unexpected and 'on call' nature of work collides with employees' anticipated work and life plans, thereby triggering the harmful work-life interference.

This stressful working environment is one of the significant factors damaging Chinese employees' WLB. As high-performance, high-commitment or high-involvement working practices started to be popularised in HRM, employees' productivity and effectiveness rather than the actual working hours gained attention. Employees who work under these work systems are supposed to have reasonable autonomy to manage their work and personal needs. However, the acquisition of WLB arrangements under such systems is a trade-off against meeting workload and performance targets. For instance, leave entitlements may be linked to performance ratings, and only employees who achieve these targets will benefit from the leave entitlement. This means employees are under pressure to secure the leave they should have as a right (Foster and Ren, 2015). As a result, it cannot be assumed that high-performance HRM systems are not associated with increased stress and hardship, negatively impacting upon an employee's WLB.

Nevertheless, the negative link between the work demands and Chinese employees' WLB may not be perceived to be as serious as outlined, because Chinese employees may be more tolerant with regards to a negative spillover from work. There are several factors that can mediate the negative relationship between work demands and WLB. Fundamentally, it is the nature of paid work that employees are less able to decide their work demands. Under the unequal employment relationship, employees do not always

have the choice of what work they do, how long they do it and when they work. Particularly, with the dominance of unitary management in the Chinese workplace, employees hold less opportunity to request their personal work-life needs through bilateral bargaining channels. Furthermore, the background of deepening marketisation, global competition and a buyer's labour market drives cost efficiency management. The institutionalisation of WLB and formal work-life management is seen as a cost rather than a mechanism to raise employers' productivity. In addition, the culturally embedded concepts of work diligence and self-sacrifice, help sustain workplace cultures of long working hours and 'workplace is home', blurring work-life boundaries and reinforcing the long working norms (Lu, 2016). As a result, when heavy work demands and work intensification are seen as a norm, and Chinese employers are insensitive to WLB discourse and management, then employees are less likely to perceive the links between work demands and their WLB so negatively.

Therefore, concerning the critical relationships between work demands and WLB that Chinese employees' experience, this research seeks to address a second question to establish Chinese employees' work-life experience, mainly focusing on working hours and workload.

Research Question 2a. How do work demands, especially working time and workload, impact Chinese employees' work-life experience?

4.2.2 Work-related outcomes of Chinese employees' WLB

The research findings from studies into the relationship between employees' WLB and work-related outcomes are both inadequate and mixed. Some WLB research in China suggests that an adverse WLB is likely to lead to detrimental performance consequences

arising from the work-life conflict. At the individual level, negative psychological and health-related problems may be caused by work-life conflicts. These outcomes may lower employees' career ambitions, worsen employees' happiness and quality of life in the long run (Yu et al., 2010; Foster and Ren, 2015). At the organisational level, research finds work-life imbalance associated with poor job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Li et al., 2013) as well as low performance (Li et al., 2013). By contrast, there are more research findings that indicate work-life conflict may not impact (negatively) on Chinese employees' work-related outcomes. Since WLC is seen as a fact with regard to employees' daily life, Chinese employees can naturally get by despite it (Zhao et al., 2017a). In support of this argument, an increasing number of work-life studies using Chinese samples found a weak or non-existent relationship between work-life conflict and work-related consequences such as job satisfaction, affective commitment and turnover intentions (Zhang et al., 2012a). There is no direct correlation found between work-home interference and job performance, where Chinese work values act as a moderator to buffer the negative work-life spillover on employees' job performance (Lu et al., 2015c).

Exploring the reasons, Zhang et al. (2012a) attribute the insignificant link between WLB and work-related outcomes to the dominance in China of work priorities emanating from economic and cultural perspectives. Chinese employees who experience work-life conflict may develop positive attitudes toward their employers because work demands can ultimately bring benefits to them and their families. Coffey et al., (2009) indicate this is a particular case for the younger professional employees. On the basis of less family responsibility, this group appreciates not only income but also the career development opportunities resulting from achieving high work demands. Therefore, it is argued that an imbalance caused by heavy work demands is not bound to lead to a deterioration of

employees' job performance. From a cultural perspective, Chinese employees embrace hardworking ethos. It can motivate them, such that they strive for higher job performance even though the resultant long work hours come at the expense of their personal and family time (Lu et al., 2015c). Further, Chinese collectivistic culture values loyalty and relationships at work and Confucianism advocate the social virtue of the "forbearance". Chinese employees are thus, more likely to tolerate WLC, which in turn moderates potential job dissatisfaction or low commitment, having a less negative influence on the work behaviours (Lu. et al., 2009).

This research considers exploring the link, if any, between employees' WLB and job performance. The current empirical findings remain inconclusive. As one of the key organisational outcomes, job performance is always being put forward as a strategic concern in HRM. While employees' work-related outcomes are unlikely to be attributed to WLB owing to the work domination and WLB marginalisation (Zhang et al., 2012b; Zhao et al., 2012b), any link which can be found can contribute to highlighting the role of WLB in Chinese organisations. In particular, evidence of positive relationships may directly encourage organisational consideration of employees' WLB issues in the Chinese context (Guest, 2017; Zhao et al., 2017b). Consequently, considering the research scarcity and strategic meaning, the second part of the second research question aims to examine the relationship with WLB and job performance for Chinese employees.

Research Question 2b. Do Chinese employees' work-life experiences have an impact on their job performance?

4.2.3 Work-related interventions of Chinese employees' WLB

Since the Chinese government no longer intervenes in the day-to-day employment relationship (Cooke, 2005), work resources related to employees' WLB are mobilised and

managed by the organisation, mostly determined at particular levels of management. This section will examine and explore how the formal WLB related policies and practice and actual workplace context address employees' work-life issues at the organisational level.

4.2.2.1 Work-life balance policies and practices in the Chinese workplace

(1) The rationale to adopt work-life balance policies and practices

While the work-life balance policies and practices (WLBPPs) are not fully formalised and prevalent in China, organisations are requested to take the employees' WLB into formal consideration in relation to the 'business case' and 'social case' (Lin. et al., 2011). Shadowed by the western HRM, WLB initiatives are argued to be one of the mechanisms to attract talent and retain staff. The Chinese labour market has had skill shortages for years despite the rapid economic expansion (Cooke, 2005). The adoption of WLBPPs might bring benefits both to the companies and the employees by attracting, motivating and retaining high-quality employees and enhancing current employees' job satisfaction and labour productivity (Siu, 2015; Ding et al. 2006).

Furthermore, employees' WLB can be an important political and social arena in China. The Chinese regime emphasises the construction of a harmonious society, applying to the employment relationship, workplace and the organisation in the face of enhanced business pressures and social tensions. The organisation may be encouraged to embed humanised care into the organisational culture as part of the employer's moral duty and social obligation. In addition, with employees' intrinsic aspirations for happy working life and better life quality (Lu and Cooper, 2015), organisations are socially obliged to provide the available assistance for employees, especially when individuals' capacities and family resources are insufficient to deal with the conflicts between work and life. In

this respect, taking WLB into organisational account and initiating a WLB-related programme can be seen as a beneficial approach to meeting the government's political mission and social responsibilities.

(2) The possible types of work-life balance policies and practices

Chinese HRM policies and practices are primarily based on labour regulations; WLBPPs is not an exception. As reviewed in the previous section, the institutional contexts in which organisations are embedded impact upon the provision and implementation of WLBPPs. Immersed in Western management philosophies and practices, Chinese employers have been trying to learn and adapt western HRM practices to fit into the Chinese context, underpinned by the central tenet of HRM that human resources are a source of competitive advantage (Rowley and Warner, 2013). Consequently, some limited HR interventions related to employees' WLB are developing at the Chinese organisational level. These have been identified by Xiao and Cooke (2012: 13) and are summarised in Table 4 below.

In China, organisations primarily choose to adopt financial rewards and material incentives to financially support their employees' family needs, which can be an effective way to relieve employees' discontent resulting from the high work demands and compensate sacrificing their personal time. As elsewhere, financial security and the capacity to provide for one's family in the future are key concerns of employees in China (Russel and Ross, 2008). Secondly, welfare benefits may take a wide variety of forms including subsidies for meals, housing, transport and medical care, holiday tours, gifts for festivals, topping-up social security, sponsorship of education and training, entertainment and social events, paid holidays and so on" (Cooke, 2013: 41).

**Table 4 Summary of WLB practices in Chinese enterprises
(Xiao and Cooke, 2012)¹⁸**

<p>Financial rewards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing income, e.g. wages, bonuses and benefits, particularly for key employees whom the company is keen to retain • Organising social activities, art and cultural events and sports events after work and during festivals • Providing paid holidays for managerial staff • Engaging family members (e.g. taking key employees and their family members out for dinner regularly) • Organising company-sponsored holiday trips with family members • Subsidies such as food, transport, after-work entertainment/fitness facilities
<p>Non-financial rewards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career development planning to let employees see their career prospects with the company • Promotion based on performance and achievement¹⁹ • Recognition of employees' excellent performance
<p>Working time adjustment/arrangements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising exercise breaks • Reducing overtime • Compulsory rest time for employees • Time off in lieu • Simplifying work process and organising working time more effectively • Flexible working time (adopted informally mainly in government organisations moreover, private professional service firms such as law firms and accountancy firms)
<p>Moral teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking employees to understand the difficult situation of the company and contribute towards its goals/performance targets • Cultivating a sense of achievement and pride among employees by working hard for the company
<p>Spiritual support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up employee self-help groups to reduce stress, with marginal effect • Employee-assistance programs or counselling services

¹⁸ Xiao and Cooke's (2012) pioneering research summarises HR interventions related to Chinese employees' WLB issues from 122 semi-structured interviews in 76 Chinese organisations in the south-eastern and southern provinces. While these interventions shown in the table 4.2 cannot fully represent WLB practices in the Chinese enterprises, considering Chinese WLB practices are rarely researched, their research has provided the most comprehensive summary of WLB practices in Chinese enterprises so far.

¹⁹ The reason that promotion is considered a non-financial reward here may be because it can be regarded as an acknowledgement of employees' competency and enhanced social identity. Nevertheless, this research tends to argue that promotion is associated with financial rewards.

Some organisations also extend their welfare activities to sending presents/red packages (e.g. for an employees' birthday, marriage, childbirth or children enrolling at university) and condolence letters/money (in the case of sickness hardship or family bereavement). Chinese employees appreciate material rewards to secure a better quality of life in the current period economic development; while it is also argued that Chinese collectivist and paternalistic culture play an important role in providing social bonding activities to develop and maintain a harmonious relationship among employees and between the firm and its workforce (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

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develop and maintain a harmonious relationship among employees and between the firm and its workforce (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

However, several practices working as financial rewards may be less available for now. In the Chinese context, organising social activities, events and trips for employees or their families are seen as financial rewards rather than non-financial social engagement and recognition. This may be because these approaches are often fully sponsored by companies. This has long been a feature of workplace welfare provision in SOEs as a manifestation of Chinese paternalistic culture (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Nevertheless, Danford and Zhao (2012: 841) argue “the new dominance of market relations in SOE activity has undercut traditional workers’ privileges in quite profound ways”. Therefore, traditional Chinese values that were embedded in management have been diminished by the modernising reform process, and plenty of employees and managers have endured hardship due to the reduction in and loss of welfare support (ibid.).

More recently, the newly adopted central policy, "The Six Bans and the Eight Regulations"²⁰ may also result in a significant decline in offering welfare provisions. The CPC and central Chinese government issue these strict rules to regulate the officialdom in the public sector including SOEs. It consists of a code of practice at work, regulations for controls of public funds, and rationalisation of administrative budgets. Under these

²⁰ "The Six Bans and the Eight Regulations" is a set of regulations stipulated by the CPC and Central Government, first announced on 4th December 2012. These bans and regulations aim at instilling more discipline among party members and seek to tackle the culture of privilege permeated in Chinese officialdom and the corruption in socio-economic development. The bans and regulations involve all public organisations and their departments, including SOEs. The relevant contents include, for example, organisations should: vigorously streamline social and commendation activities and not engage in festival condolence activities unless approved. It is strictly forbidden to use public funds to engage in mutual visits, gifts, banquets or to organise and participate in high-consumption entertainment and fitness activities, organisational vacations and travelling abroad; It is not permissible to allocate allowances, subsidies, bonuses and in-kind materials without a legitimate and appropriate reason.

rules, managers of SOEs are severely constrained when it comes to sponsoring any of those social engagements. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that Chinese enterprises, especially SOEs, will be less able to financially maintain some of the traditional forms of financial rewards which might alleviate employees' work-life balance problems.

Non-financial rewards including work recognition and career development planning can also help employees to trade off work-life imbalance. In particular, the better-educated and more career-oriented would appreciate these practices as intrinsic motivations. Furthermore, moral teaching is an informal and cost-effective approach for organisations and managers to seek employee and family understanding of additional work demands through effective communication and to persuade employees to align with organisational goals. Likewise, the management philosophy is based on China's paternalistic perspectives where employees should commit to their organisation and expect employers to take care of them in turn (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). In doing so, it is customary for Chinese employees to be educated by their managers to feel glory as hard-working workers and feel shame as lazy workers (Rowley and Warner, 2013).

Notably, it is argued that such a management approach mediated by cultural values can be different from the perspective of partnership or mutual gains highlighted in the western HRM regime (Danford and Zhao, 2012). The perspective of partnership or mutual gains aims to address the interests' dissonance within the employment relationship that is inherent to capitalist workplace dynamics. Guest (2002a, 2017: 356) argues the perspective focuses on offering direct participatory and information sharing context in the workplace where "a range of policies and practices associated with work and life

satisfaction for workers and higher performance for the organisation can effectively be implemented". The approach of Chinese moral teaching seeks to create mutual understanding, trust and gain between employees and their organisation. However, the problems lie in the following two aspects. First, the approach is not conducted through formal HR practices but is largely dependent on cultural immersion and managerial mentoring. It may be challenging to assess the extent to which employees' satisfaction and organisational effectiveness can result from the use of the approach. Second, the unitary approach may temporarily cover disharmony but may not tackle the conflict between employees and organisational demands rooted in the nature of employment relations. The underlying discontent of the employee regarding work domination and intrusion caused by work intensification may be demonstrated in a very inharmonious way, such as high turnover and the mass layoff of workers in SOEs (Hassard et al., 2008).

Compared to these three approaches, the working time adjustment/arrangements that are widely legitimised and adopted in western countries are not mainstream in the Chinese employment context. Flexible working arrangements are only tentatively operated in some MNCs located in China (i.e. Google, P&G, Volkswagen) and Chinese multinational enterprises (i.e. Lenovo, Huawei) (Liu et al., 2008) with the aim of incentivising key or highly skilled, managerial, professional and technical employees.

Due to the absence of formal work-life management, the most common solutions to cope with employees' work-life issues are informal work adjustments and employee shaped personal solutions in Chinese companies. Informal work adjustments happen when employees suffer health-related problems that influence work performance or encounter emergent family issues on a case-by-case basis (Liu et al., 2008). Personal solutions are

still the most pervasive coping mechanism to ameliorate work-life conflict (Aaltio and Huang, 2007; Coffey et al., 2009; Lu, 2015). For example, some working couples choose to focus on their career by postponing parenthood; most dual-earner couples rely on their family members for household and childcare support, and a few of them choose to outsource childcare support. A few employees have to change/quit their job, either voluntarily or involuntarily, as rigid work regimes do not allow them to work flexibly.

Nevertheless, this summary of WLB practices is a ‘snapshot’ from Chinese enterprises. China does not have an institutionalised work-life environment; organisations vary in their susceptibility to competition as well as in their ability to respond to the needs of their employees. Subsequently, the extent of the effect of organisational arrangements on employees' WLB and organisational development remains unclear. These two points are reviewed in the following two subsections.

(3) The effectiveness of WLBPPs in the Chinese workplace

It is argued that the implementation of WLBPPs is problematic in Chinese organisations. First, from the employer's side, HRM research has been dominated by a ‘managerialist-determined HRM’ perspective. The HRM practice is determined by the employers based on business strategies focused upon cost-effectiveness and profit-maximisation (Lamond and Zheng, 2010). Researchers examining the effect of WLBPPs in Hong Kong, have found that employers struggle to assess the costs and benefits of WLBPPs whilst seeking to maintain an organisation's competitiveness in the market (Chou and Cheung, 2013; Siu, 2015; Vyas et al., 2017). The financial costs and the resultant administrative burden make Chinese employers afraid to implement WLBPPs. It is argued that the implementation of WLB initiatives requires expertise to design and trial, managers and

employees' training in explaining implementation and the relevant advanced IT support to implement and maintain, all of which is costly. In the absence of expertise and planning, any rush to implement WLBPPs may have a negative impact on organisational effectiveness. Even where practices have been formally identified in written policies in Hong Kong, they tend to be informally adopted by managers, using discretion, under the premise of controlling costs (Chou and Cheung, 2013). It is argued that the usage to WLBPPs is not equitable and this undermines their efficacy in reducing employees' WLC (Vyas et al., 2017). Thus, the practices appear to be ineffective from an employee's perspective as they do not address the root of WLC.

Secondly, the prevailing performance-oriented work system may reduce employees' intention to use WLBPPs. With globalisation and marketisation, most employers deploy a combination of business tactics (such as diversification, internationalization, and product innovation and quality enhancement) and high performance and commitment HRM systems to enhance their management efficiency and productivity (Cooke, 2009). Compared to the HRM mainstream, the adoption of WLBPPs is less likely to be regarded as a competitive advantage for organisations because few rivals and competitors appear to adopt these plans (Lin et al., 2011). Therefore, material-oriented compensation is widely used as the main mechanism to address employees' work and life satisfaction overall. Performance-related targets and pay can enrich employees' WLB through securing higher pay, improving professional competency, and gaining promotion. However, attempts to request time-related WLBPPs are more often linked to negative consequences on performance, and thus on pay and career advancement (Coffey et al., 2009). Thus, employees are less likely to make use of any beneficial work-life arrangements and continuously strain their time and energy (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

Additionally, moral teaching can be a trap that increases the detrimental effects on employees. With organisational 'education', employees may accept a 'hardworking ethos' by working voluntary extra hours on a discretionary basis and even accepting wage reductions.

Regarding the effect of WLBPPs on the organisation, the WLBPPs that are often perceived significant in Anglo-American research, may or may not act as best practices for promoting organisational effectiveness in China. Therefore, it is important to assess the extent to which WLBPPs are available, used and effective in Chinese organisations facing business pressures. This leads to the third set of research questions, which this research seeks to address:

Research Question 3a. What institutionalised policies and practices related to employees' work-life balance exist within the Chinese organisation?

Research Question 3b. How do these policies and practices, if any, impact on their work-life balance, and job performance?

Research Question 3c. Are these policies and practices available, used and effective?

4.2.2.2 Work-life balance context in the Chinese workplace

Zhang and Morris (2014:71) argue "Chinese people are more used to relying on people's judgement and interactions than on regulations". As the WLBPPs are not prevalent in China, having contextual workplace work-life support may be crucial for employees to challenge the traditional norm of high work demands. The existing research indicates the contextual factors such as corporate culture, line managerial support and collegial behaviour may have a complementary (positive) effect on employees' WLB in the

Chinese context (Zhang et al., 2012b). This section will review the availability and effectiveness of these contextual resources and informal work-life management approaches in the Chinese workplace.

(1) The rationale for constructing a work-life balance context in the Chinese workplace

The construction of organisational WLB context is the foundation to initiate the WLBPPs and make them available and effective in the workplace. It can be argued that if the formal work-life management approach, based upon written WLBPPs, is marginalised, having a supportive culture and climate in organisations becomes essential to promote and facilitate work-life management for Chinese employees (Lu and Cooper, 2015). As Stock et al. (2015) find, the existence of a work-family culture rather than work-life policy has an effect on employees and the organisation in the Chinese workplace. This is perhaps because, in China, organisational culture incorporates HRM practices that ultimately bind employees to their company and the broader society (Warner, 2009). Also, managers in China may care, but they prefer to deal with employees' requests informally rather than institutionalising work-life arrangements (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). If WLB is valued and there is contextualised managerial support, it is argued that Chinese organisations would be more likely to initiate WLB-related practices and implement them effectively (Coffey et al., 2009). Even where WLBPPs including legalised and innovative policies and practices are applied in some Chinese organisations, the lack of WLB awareness can limit how employees actually use the practices, which negatively impacts on their effectiveness. Only with awareness and managerial support for WLB issues can (available) WLBPPs be positively perceived by the employees, which may, in turn, lead to positive job performance.

The construction of organisational WLB context is an effective way for an organisation's leadership to respond to the political and social tasks of 'constructing the harmonious society' (Warner, 2009). Since the principal aim of China has shifted from aggressive economic growth into the building of 'harmonious societies', sustainable development models involve both political and social responsibilities for Chinese organisations. As Cooke (2013) has observed, the CPC has sought to introduce 'corporate culture' into organisations to keep them in line with harmonious priorities. Therefore, work-life values could be inserted into organisational culture and the day-to-day employment relationship. In doing so, WLB can be identified as an intangible benefit in fostering the humanised workplace, maintaining morale in the workforce and enhancing the sustainable development of Chinese organisations.

(2) Channels to construct a work-life balance context in the Chinese workplace.

According to the taxonomy of contextual work-life supports (reviewed in Chapter 2) the WLB context can be assessed at two levels: one focuses on the overall cultural values and norms manifested in the organisational level, and the other is multi-level lateral cooperation and coordination with managers and colleagues at the group level (Kossek et al., 2010).

The WLB context primarily refers to the permeation of work-life culture from work ideology to the operational process in the workplace. An organisational culture containing WLB features has the advantage of building up a supportive atmosphere to help employees' WLB and also enhance the availability of work-life policies (Lu, 2016). Secondly but significantly, line managers are responsible for adopting practices on a case to case basis. As the Xiao and Cooke (2012) illustrate, Chinese managers are more willing

to show care for employees informally rather than by institutionalising work-life arrangements. Indeed, under the unitary approach to HRM in China, a line manager who takes moral responsibility to understand employees' work and life demands and is able to objectively and fairly manage employees' work arrangements, may stimulate employees' gratitude and dedication at work. Wang and Walumbwa's (2007) research in the Chinese banking sector indicates that there is only a positive relationship between the availability of flexible work arrangements and organisational commitment when employees perceived there was also support from their line managers.

Work colleagues can also play a critical role in employees' work-life management (Lu et al., 2009). Colleagues can be the group to initially share, recognise and support employees' work-life issues. Chinese employees tend to find it easier to gain interpersonal help from colleagues compared to managerial support. Mutual support is taken for granted and presupposed in the Chinese workplace, driven by traditional Chinese culture which emphasises mutual social interaction and workplace harmony (Kragh, 2012). Hence, supportive colleagues may be conducive to, for instance, enhancing the enforcement of flexible working and taking leave with fewer negative consequences.

(3) The effectiveness of the work-life balance context in the Chinese workplace

While there are possible rationales and mechanisms to foster a WLB context in the Chinese workplace, its effectiveness remains somewhat debatable. Indeed, an organisational culture committed to the value of WLB may simply be paying lip service to the concept, rather than creating an essential foundation for raising WLB awareness. Even where the harmonious workplace can be constructed, in the face of market competition, it has been argued that Chinese organisations show little inclination to

accommodate employees' needs and managers take an indifferent attitude towards employees' WLB (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Facing work demands themselves, managers are hardly able to maintain their own WLB, let alone that of their employees. Some managers will even sacrifice their own personal and familial needs to demonstrate the centrality of work in front of employees (Russel and Ross, 2008).

The effectiveness of the WLB context may be impacted by managerial informality in double-edged directions. Chinese firms that are under enormous cost-cutting pressures and pursue just-in-time employment practices are more likely to adopt HR practices with temporal flexibility and low cost (Zhu et al., 2012). Regarding employees' WLB needs, therefore, they are authorised to judge and interact with the employees to make reasonable arrangements on a case by case basis (Chen et al. 2004; Xiao and Cooke, 2012). The informal approach tends to suit organisational needs on an ad hoc basis. However, this can leave (some) employees' needs neglected, which establishes barriers to the WLB context construction and organisational sustainability. Furthermore, equal access to, and the effectiveness of, WLBPPs may be undermined by managerial subjectivity and favouritism when dealing with employees' WLB case by case. In particular, employees who have good 'Guanxi' (strong interpersonal relationship and connection) with their managers are more likely to have managerial favours to help maintain their WLB. If the managerial informality is operated depending on 'how close we are', employees from different guanxi networks may fight with each other for the work-life benefits in the same organisation (Goodall et al., 2007). This may, in turn, create problems for managing the organisation, where unfavoured employees may feel aggrieved, suffer low morale and become disengaged or even leave.

One of the major challenges for Chinese organisations is to recognise employees' work demands and life needs and to convert organisational WLB support into practice. HR practices and workplace cultural supports are expected to be carefully designed and implemented to meet both the organisational and employees' objectives (ACAS, 2015). However, institutionalised and formalised WLBPPs are not common in Chinese organisations, and as noted above, the supportive work-life context may or may not be conducive to employees' WLB. Therefore, the research seeks to address a fourth and final research question:

Research Question 4a. What are the characteristics of the work-life context constructed within Chinese organisations?

Research Question 4b. How does organisational, managerial and collegial support impact on Chinese employees' work-life experience and job performance?

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter sought to contextualise WLB issues at the Chinese national and organisational levels, based upon the existing work-life research conducted in China and the relevant public documentation (e.g. law and policy). Having mapped out the Chinese macro-national and meso-organisational context, this chapter contributed to understanding how Chinese employees' perceptions and experience are socially constructed in line with the conceptual framework developed in chapter 2; and can be examined by applying theoretical framework developed in chapter 3. This helped complete the formulation of the proposed research questions to be addressed through the research.

WLB appears a common issue for the global workforce against a backdrop of globalisation and modernisation; Chinese employees are not an exception. In the macro external environment, political, economic, legal, socio-demographic and cultural factors can work as together, shaping organisational work demands and resources, and individuals' work-life perceptions and experience. The distinctive Chinese characteristics behind each of these macro-factors enables WLB to be perceived differently in China compared to Anglo-American dominated studies. Chinese employees tend to embrace work-life integration and enrichment perspectives and remain insensitive to, or tolerant of, work-life conflict, while they suffer long working hours and work intensification (Xiao and Cooke, 2012; Zhang et al., 2012a). The existing Chinese WLB literature tends to explain the perceptions through a single lens, individual and cross-cultural perspectives (Lu and Cooper, 2015). This, it can be argued, is not sufficient when examining the meaning of WLB in China. Instead, this research aims to understand WLB holistically, based on the overall-based approach, and especially by looking at how WLB is socially-constructed at the Chinese national and organisational level.

At the national level, drawing on Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault's (2017) framework, the Chinese work-life interface is scoped from structural (e.g. economic, legal and institutional, social and demographic factors) and cultural (e.g. Chinese work values) dimensions. The dynamic of rapid economic development and the developing institutional context enhance both employees' possibility for WLB and barriers with regard to WLB in terms of work demands and resources. Changing demographics and socio-cultural factors significantly act to influence employees' perceptions of WLB by highlighting work as a means to address family demands. Meanwhile, analysis at the macro-level sheds light on the workplace context with reference to work intensification

and the lack of work-life support. Thus, it is argued that the positive perceptions of work-life integration and enrichment may be passively constructed.

The demands and resources at work at the organisational level are significant and direct contributors to Chinese employees' WLB (Foster and Ren, 2015). The demanding aspects of work, such as long working hours and a heavy and unpredictable workload, can intrude, squeeze and even fully occupy employees' non-work life under the business, labour market and increasing consumption pressures. Nevertheless, considering Chinese employees may be more tolerant of negative spill-over from work, the negative link shown between the work demands and Chinese employees' WLB may be nuanced. Furthermore, owing to the work domination and WLB marginalisation, employees' work-related outcomes are unlikely to be attributable to WLB. But because of that, it is vital to examine the link between employees' WLB and job performance. This link appears to focus substantial attention on employees' WLB in Chinese organisations.

In terms of approaches to Chinese work-life management, institutional and formal resources (i.e. WLBPPs) are not commonly found in Chinese organisations. While some HR practices are expected to address WLB issues, the existing literature does not indicate that these practices operate as 'best practice' in promoting organisational effectiveness in China. Therefore, this research seeks to examine the availability and effectiveness of WLBPPs for employees and organisations in China. Correspondingly, without formal approaches to work-life management, a supportive work-life context may (or may not) be informally designed and implemented to facilitate business growth and address employees' WLB needs. Thus, this chapter identified a need to examine the informal approach to work-life management and its effect on employees and organisations.

The contextualisation of WLB in China identifies the need to apply the deductive theoretical framework cautiously and rationalises the use of a mixed methodological approach in this research. The heterogeneity of the work-life issues in China indicates that the Anglo-American work-life theories, frameworks and arguments used to construct the framework may not be adequate in explaining Chinese WLB issues. The literature review chapter (2) indicates that there is relatively little research about Chinese perceptions of WLB and work-life management. Therefore, it is optimal that mixed methods are adopted in this research to understand these largely under-documented WLB issues in China. More details of the overview and justification for the research methodology and methods are, therefore, presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Researching WLB in Chinese organisations

5.0 Introduction

This chapter offers an overview and justification for the research methodology and methods utilised in this study and a reflexive account of the research fieldwork undertaken to address the research aims and questions. This is a single case study of two Chinese State-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the pharmaceutical sector using a mixed methods approach.

The three previous chapters provide the foundation to understand why the research design is built upon a case study and a mixed methods approach. WLB issues are complex and dynamic; it is a socially-constructed concept which is influenced by multi-layered factors as is shown in the conceptual framework explored in this study (in chapter 2). Given that, the theoretical framework (outlined in chapter 3) demonstrates the complex and controversial inter-relationships between WLB and related variables. Moreover, the heterogeneity of WLB in relation to the national context means that caution is required when researching the meaning and construct of WLB in the Chinese workplace (as outlined in chapter 4). It is argued that traditional quantitative approaches (alone) are not appropriate to examine socially-constructed WLB and to comprehensively interpret the causality of WLB issues, especially in an under-documented and heterogenous Chinese context. Therefore, a case study approach with multi-sources of data can offer different perspectives in terms of employees' perceptions of WLB and approaches to work-life management. It has also been noted a significant proportion of work-life/family researchers have been calling for further WLB research based upon in-depth case studies using mixed methodology (e.g. Kalliath and Brough, 2008; Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Xiao and Cooke, 2012, Putnik, et al., 2018). In response to this methodological call, this chapter particularly contributes by outlining the mixed methods (online surveys, face-to-

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face semi-structured interviews and documents) adopted in this research, and highlighting the advantages of data triangulation in terms of understanding Chinese WLB issues.

This chapter starts with an overview of the philosophical underpinning of the research methodology in section 5.1. This is followed by the justification of adopting a case study and mixed methods in section 5.2, and the elaboration of integrated research design with three mixed methods is covered in section 5.3. Prior to the presentation of data collection and analysis, section 5.4 provides a detailed overview of the background to the case study organisations and an explanation of the fieldwork undertaken. This aims to rationalise the choice of methodological approaches in fieldwork. The ethical issues and practical problems that were faced in the project are identified along with how the researcher addressed these. The details of the sample and the tools of data collection and data analysis procedures are then presented in section 5.5. Section 5.6 provides a reflexive account of the research process to evaluate research ethics, validity, reliability and the scope for generalisation. Potential research bias and methodological limitations are also discussed. This chapter concludes in section 5.7 which summarises the key issues raised in the chapter and indicates the structure of the following two findings chapters.

5.1 A deductive approach underpinned by Pragmatism

The research strategy is based upon a pragmatist methodological approach and utilises mixed methods research derived from a deductive theoretical framework. The deductive approach develops conceptual and theoretical structures which are tested by empirical observation, reflecting that a deductive approach entails developing a theory or hypothesis and then designing a research strategy to test the hypothesis (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Creswell, 2014). As the WLB theory and literature originate and develop from the Anglo-American setting, HRM scholars (Rousseau and Barends, 2011) argued for

evidence-based approaches in the specific context to establish links between western theory and Chinese practices.

Pragmatism can underpin the utilisation of the deductive approach in this research. It is a philosophical tradition that originated in the U.S. in the late 19th century and has been advocated by numerous researchers (e.g. Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and Jon Dewey) over the last century (Shook and Margolis, 2008). In terms of an ontological perspective, pragmatists posit that there are multiple realities (i.e. subjective, objective) in the real world, rejecting the traditional dualism (objective versus subjective) (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). From an epistemological viewpoint, knowledge (theory and practice) is considered to be both socially constructed and based on the reality of the world of which we are a part (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The pragmatists suggest multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints to review the world (Johnson et al., 2007). As a result, pragmatism offers a practical and outcome-oriented perspective that helps researchers select multiple methods to better address their research questions from multi-perspectives rather than adhering to a purely quantitative or qualitative paradigm. (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

The philosophical position of pragmatism can lay the foundations for this research project's methodology. This research aims are to identify and analyse practical problems: WLB issues that are socially constructed at societal, organisational, and familial and the individual level. Multiple perspectives and approaches to explore WLB issues and understand its nature exist. Given that, a mixed methodology was considered to be the most appropriate methodological approach.

5.2 Research methodology

5.2.1 Mixed methodology

Underpinned by pragmatism, this research adopted a mixed methodology approach to research socially constructed WLB issues. A mixed methodology is widely recognised as a synthesis of qualitative and quantitative research (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). It refers to 'the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004: 17). Sale et al. (2002) point out qualitative and quantitative approaches and the philosophical positions they are based upon are incompatible because they do not study the same phenomena. However, Brannen (2005) argues that many of the distinctions are not that significant between quantitative and qualitative methodology. In order to address the research objectives and questions, qualitative and quantitative research is interrelated during the different research phases in practice. The use of mixed methodology can lead to a broader understanding and corroboration of the phenomena than merely either qualitative or quantitative methods and thus enhances the quality of research (Johnson et al., 2007).

The utilisation of mixed methodology could echo the methodological trend of WLB research. A significant number of WLB researchers have been calling for conducting the mixed methodology rather than adopting single quantitative or qualitative approaches (Kalliath and Brough, 2008; Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Putnik et al., 2018). Methods including social policy data collection, (quantitative) surveys and (qualitative) interviews can be triangulated to examine WLB issues in greater depth and breadth (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault 2017). In particular, there is a clearer need for in-depth qualitative research. One of the methodological features of WLB research is its almost total reliance on

quantitative research using constructed work-family/life measurements (ibid.). Bardeel et al. (2008) argue that “the overemphasis on quantitative methods faces the risk of masking anomalies and counterintuitive findings.” Instead, qualitative methods can be adopted to tackle these weaknesses through contextualising the social issues and exploring the causality derived from quantitative findings (Liu and Cheung, 2015).

The mixed research design was utilised in this research to fill in the methodological gap and provide a robust understanding of WLB in China. The quantitative approach has the advantage of generalising and calibrating the WLB issues from an Anglo-American to Chinese setting but faces difficulties in explaining its socially constructed nature. Cooke (2018) states the phenomenon and issues involved in Chinese HRM, are often context-dependent and interdependent, which requires in-depth and qualitative investigation. Lu et al. (2015a) call for more in-depth qualitative research with a contextual thrust, arguing that examining peoples’ perceptions of WLB and the relationships between WLB and other factors would be valuable in the Chinese research context. As a result, this research draws upon a mixed methodological design that takes the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach was used to examine the general picture of WLB in the Chinese workplace (what happened); the qualitative approach was sought to explain the causality between variables and enrich the understanding of WLB issues in the Chinese context with a confirmatory and exploratory nature (why did it happen and how to solve it). Before moving on to the illustration of mixed methods design in section 5.3, the case study research design will be outlined as the strategy to embrace mixed methodology.

5.2.2 Case study approach

This study adopted a mixed methodology, within a case study, thereby seeking to promote theoretical insights and enhance knowledge of WLB in the Chinese context. Simons (2009:21) define the case study is an "in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real life' context." This approach has been frequently criticised due to the potential drawbacks in generalising the results. However, Yin (2014) points out that the case study is a valid method in three aspects of generalisation: theoretical generalisation (or theory building), falsification (or theory testing), and empirical generalisation. First, by performing an in-depth and detailed examination of a social phenomenon within case studies, researchers can illuminate the underlying mechanisms of such a phenomenon and explain cause and effect relationships, which contributes to theory building. Secondly, since case studies look at the social phenomenon in a rich context, they can identify the potential contingencies under which the explanatory mechanisms may occur to test the hypotheses proposed by existing theory. In addition, while case studies may be less generalisable than those from quantitative studies with regard to large sample size, the qualitative results can be generalised depending upon the representativeness of the sample. Consequently, the case study approach is not necessarily weak in terms of generalisation. It is argued to be an enlightened way to not only test or update established theories in the context but generalise the information (Strauss and Whitfield, 2018).

According to Yin (2014: 2), a case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon 'the case' in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be evident". In this research, the context is deliberately part of the design as employees' WLB issues are a complex and dynamic social phenomenon related

to macro-, meso- and micro- issues in the individual, family, organisational and societal context. As Anderson (2009) suggests, the case study research strategy is particularly useful when the issues of employment and HRM examined are fully embedded within its context. Furthermore, the case study strategy can take advantage of the breadth of methods of data-collection (Yin, 2014). It provided this research with a frame to utilise the mixed methods to examine the WLB issues systematically. The detailed design of mixed methods adopted in this research is described in the next section.

5.3 Mixed research design

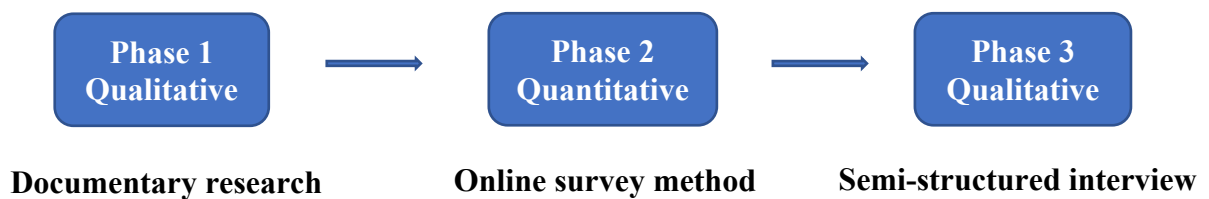
This research utilised mixed methods for data collection. The term ‘mixed methods’ refers to the use of two or more methods in a research project yielding both qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell et al., 2014; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). There are mainly two advantages of adopting mixed methods in social science research. On the one hand, mixed methods can lead to greater validity and understanding of the study results (Cavana et al., 2001). On the other hand, using mixed methods encourages the researcher to consider complicated issues pertinent to both the depth and breadth of the study at all stages of the research process (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

In responding to current WLB literature, the adoption of mixed methods allows an examination and analysis of WLB issues in a non-western context in depth and breadth. This resonates with Xiao and Cooke (2012) who call for the use of mixed methods in Chinese WLB research in order to create a more robust picture of work-life situations and investigate prospects for organisational interventions. Indeed, utilising mixed methods was adopted to create synergies to help understand WLB issues in this research. The findings from the quantitative and qualitative methods can be complementary to each other; the use of quantitative methods helped to build up a broad picture of WLB;

qualitative methods offered deeper insights into understanding WLB issues and approaches to work-life management in the Chinese context.

Specifically, this research adopted an integrated mixed design including documentary analysis, an online survey and semi-structured interviews sequentially, according to the Creswell's (2007) classification. Figure 6 shows the three-phase process. The proposed process was to: collect documentary data to analyse the WLB issues in the Chinese context; proceed with an online survey to obtain a picture of Chinese WLB in terms of employees' perceptions; and follow up with semi-structured interviews to explain the survey responses and explore workplace issues in more detail. Further information related to each procedure will be presented below.

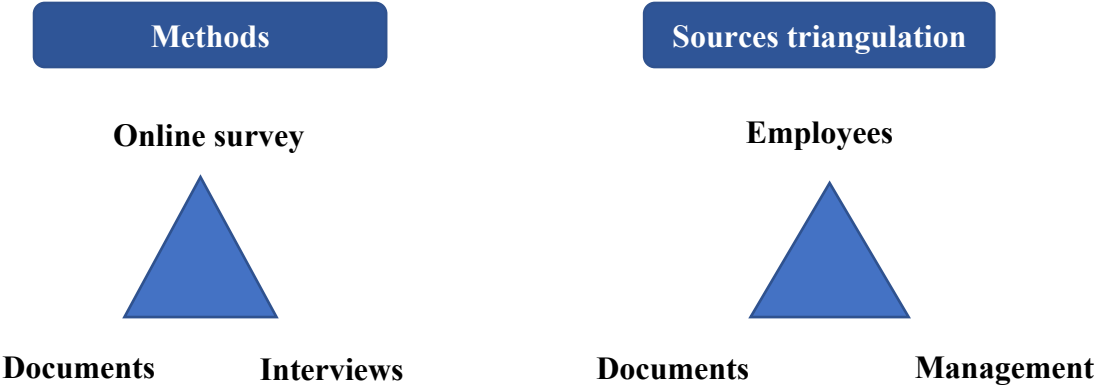
Figure 6 Sequential integrated mixed research design



The utilisation of these three research methods was aimed at achieving data triangulation in the data analysis. Triangulation is a technique that facilitates the validation of data through cross verification from two or more sources. This contributes to acquiring a more accurate picture of what is occurring in the research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Figure 7 below illustrates two types of triangulation involved, by method and data source /participant, which are conducive to providing robust information and data from different angles, with the aim of enhancing validity and reliability (Anderson, 2009). While previous HRM and WLB research predominantly focussed on using self-reported outcomes either for employees or managers (Casper et al., 2007; Cooke, 2013), this

research considered both employees' and management's perspectives. This allows the sources of data to cross-check and provides an opportunity to shed light on both employee and managerial WLB concerns.

Figure 7 Cross triangulated design in the research analysis



5.3.1 Documentary methods

The documentary method is a technique used to categorise, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical sources, most commonly written documents, whether in the private or public domain (personal papers, financial records, or state archives, communications or legislation) (Payne and Payne, 2004). In this research, this method was conducted in the first phase of the research to identify relevant national, regional and organisational factors related to WLB. External and internal documents were collected at this stage. The external documents tended to include the labour law, policy documents, government pronouncements and proceedings, and public institutional reports that related to Chinese employees' work and life experience. The internal documents were expected to cover organisational/HRM strategy and procedures for the case organisations. Analysis of the documents was planned to help to contextualise the questions used in the subsequent survey and interviews as well as offer background information on formal policies and practices for data analysis.

5.3.2 Survey methods

The self-administered online survey was undertaken in the second phase to investigate information to reflect the participants' perceptions and perceived experience in a range of WLB issues. Creswell (2014) defines "a survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population". It tends to be used for descriptive and explanatory research. It aimed to help identify and describe the variability in WLB phenomena, while minimising the researchers' subjectivity. As a quantitative method it may also enable the researcher to draw inferences to the population of Chinese employees. The online survey is a particularly practical and relatively cost-effective method that offers the capacity for substantial information to be collected from a number of participants in a short period and the opportunity to use software packages to objectively analyse the data (Bryman, 2011:245). The survey also acted crucially as a means of providing responses which could be examined using the final research method: semi-structured interviews.

5.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Informed by the results of the survey stage, semi-structured interviews were used to help explain the result of the survey and provide a more in-depth exploration of WLB issues. An interview, as an open-ended and flexible encounter, helps researchers obtain an 'authentic' understanding of issues in a distinctive context (Fontana and Frey, 2003). Moreover, qualitative research, especially the interview, can help to explore the work-family practices and supportive working environment in great depth (Poelmans, 2005). Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured schedule because it is a flexible, data-rich, stimulating, cumulative and collaborative technique to combine the established interview outline with open questions and help to gain an "authentic understanding of the participants' attitudes and experience" (Punch, 2014: 147). In addition, the semi-

structured interview method is appropriate to be used in this research context because it has been widely recognised in cross-cultural research for its potential to explore cultural differences that cannot be easily spotted in the survey data (Woodhams et al., 2015). The semi-structured interview design is critical for use in this research. As Liu and Cheung (2015) argue in relation to WLB research, interviews have advantages over the structured surveys. On the one hand, researchers are able to check the survey findings, flexibly explore the unknown information and perceive participants' emotional information through proper probing in conversations, adding richness to the data. On the other, interviews have the potential to build theory for further validation in future research. For example, WLB demands and resources that have yet to be identified or theorised in (this) research can be being identified in qualitative data and integrated into future research designs to expand the theoretical framework.

5.4 Case context and fieldwork overview

The background information relating to the pharmaceutical sector and case organisations are described in this section. The choice of case study organisations can contribute to interpreting the empirical research findings due to the significant influence of the characteristics of the organisations and its workforce on WLB issues. Peretz et al. (2015) argue work-life issues and management are consistent with a contingency approach, which emphasises the need to understand the context in which the organisation exists. Access was secured by the researcher to urban Chinese white-collar employees working in two large-scaled pharmaceutical SOEs. The two organisations are researched as a holistic case but not separated as two individual cases considering that the two organisations have a relatively high level of homogeneity that can be combined to address the theoretical propositions and research questions (Yin, 2014).

5.4.1 The Organisational Context

5.4.1.1 Introduction to the pharmaceutical sector

China's pharmaceutical industry is the second largest pharmaceutical market in the world; domestically, it is one of the leading industries and is undergoing rapid growth. Previously, the business development of the pharmaceutical sector relied heavily on pharmaceutical production and manufacturing; it has now established and developed a pharmaceutical sectoral structure with a series of industrial chains including research and development, planting and manufacturing and a wide range of commercial activities. Choosing this sector as a research case is mainly because pharmaceutical SOEs can reflect the prevalent employment relationship of Chinese companies to some extent with regard to the context of government control, rapid industrial growth, and intensive competition. The business operations of pharmaceutical firms are tightly policy-oriented, and government controlled (Zhang, 2018). The majority of these firms were primarily state-owned, despite the fact that most of the pharmaceuticals have since been marketed, the government control plays a significant role, acting as a regulator and economic manager more than the employer. As the development of the pharmaceutical sector has a tight connection with people's health and lives, the Chinese government prioritises the sector's development through the political agenda and persists in depressing medicine prices to maximise benefits for people's welfare.

With a burgeoning and rapidly-ageing society in China, there are both political concerns and social expectations with regard to health care, and this stimulates vast opportunities for the industry's development and growth. The tight control by government of pricing, within an appropriate and reasonable range, limits the scope for maximising profits through sales and this is a key feature of competition in the sector (Cooke, 2009a). Consequently, any business and HRM strategies that undermine cost-effective production

are less likely to be welcomed for the reasons of organisational survival and development. Furthermore, the sector faces international competition, and Chinese pharmaceutical companies are relatively disadvantaged. Li et al., (2013) state that China still lacks specialised human resources for international Research & Development (R&D). This is particularly the case in the Chinese pharmaceutical sector. The relatively low level of R&D makes Chinese pharmaceutical firms lack brand-name medical products and traditionally depend on the imitation and adaptation from the developed countries. Large-scale Chinese pharmaceutical companies started to set up their competition strategies with the focus of innovation and customer orientation through mergers and acquisitions, collaboration in R&D with higher education institutions, R&D institutes and other enterprises. Correspondingly, the investment, management and development of human resources can be an important aspect aligning with business strategy.

Given that, the advantages of conducting this WLB research in the pharmaceutical sector may be attributed to the following two aspects. First, pharmaceutical firms are not only tightly regulated by the state but also driven by the market economy. It makes a very intriguing and representative case to explore the characteristics of Chinese enterprise in this current context. Research using samples from this sector will be valuable to generalise the findings with regard to other industries operating under the dynamics of China's market economy. Secondly, the pharmaceutical sector is a highly competitive industry involving a wide range of human capital. The companies not only undertake considerable manufacturing in the workshop and employ service workers in retail and distribution but must also attract and retain employees undertaking R&D and professional services. Addressing employees' WLB and initiating friendly WLBPPs and a supportive workplace context can be a source of competitive advantage for the Chinese organisations

in this sector. Consequently, this research was conducted in two large, representative pharmaceutical business groups.

5.4.1.2 The background of the case organisations

Two well-recognised pharmaceutical Chinese SOEs, Company A and B, were chosen as the case organisations in this research. The reason for treating these two organisations as a single case was due to their representativeness and homogeneity.

First and primarily, SOEs can be pioneer organisations that discuss WLB issues due to their relatively stable economic status and institutional environment. SOEs account for 30 to 40 % of total GDP and about 20 % of China's total employment, although the number of SOEs has been shrinking since the economic reforms (World Bank, 2013). The relatively stable economic development can be appreciated because of the control exerted by central and local governments through the State Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) and its support for relevant policy benefits and government resources. Under the supervision of the government, SOEs are established as the 'model employer' for implementing labour legislation fully, promoting employment stability and harmony, and investing in human capital training. This external environment offers SOEs a context to consider employees' work-life rights and benefits despite fierce market competition. The headquarters of the two case organisations are located in the same region where they are controlled by the same local government through the provincial SASAC. The homogeneous geopolitical context determines both companies are regulated within the same policy framework and guidelines and given a similar level of policy profits and government resources.

Secondly, there is a similar regional advantage gained by both these organisations. Their geographical location in the mountainous southwestern province leads to similar features in terms of business competition and labour mobility. They both take advantage of various (local) precious herbs as raw materials in their medicine, and this drives product and marketing strategies, which can bring about competitive benefits for the companies. Furthermore, as they are headquartered in the inland province, the long distance inter-provincial migration is not a critical issue for most of the employees in the two organisations. Consequently, regional competitive advantage and limited labour mobility may lead to greater stability and less dysfunctional turnover.

Thirdly, the two organisations are suitable in respect of examining WLB issues due to the similar business and human resource strategies. In terms of business operation, both of them own industry chains in the field of medical equipment, biological products, medical and daily chemicals and health food. Their business scope and ranges including R&D, production and manufacture, logistics and distribution, wholesale and retail, e-business operations, both in China and internationally. Their position and size enable them to commit to integrate financial, technological and human resources, marketing, extend distribution, products and services to expand their operations, even though China is in an economic slowdown. The two organisations employ about 20,000 employees in total, among which a high proportion are a white collar and highly qualified. Moreover, the organisational documents and values publicised present a similar core value of human resource development. It is highlighted that this "cultivates, retains and attracts talent who have a sense of responsibility, dedication, and enterprising spirit²¹". This potentially reflects an organisational context within which there is a concern for employees' WLB

²¹ This quotation is referenced from one of the company values shown in company A's official website. The source is not shown so as to maintain research anonymity.

issues and work-life management, at least in terms of the business case. This makes the organisations a suitable fit with the research questions (outlined in chapter 4).

Despite these similarities, it should be noted there may be a divergence between the two companies (despite the convergence of two organisations into one single case study). Company A is stronger in terms of brands, whereas company B's strength lies in retailing. Company A is currently in the process of implementing mixed ownership reform²², which provides opportunities and challenges in terms of the management of employment relationship and HRM. The opportunities may arise from the potential human capital investment and innovation in relation to flexibility and supportive working arrangement, while challenges may emerge due to the privatisation of public services and commodification of social benefits. Company B is also undertaking strategic management development, but it tends to be more stable and is more conservative when dealing with the employment relationship in the absence of the political driver of ownership reform. Generally, they are SOEs with similar external environments and developmental demands in the same region. While the two case organisations do possess different characteristics, which lead to differences in their approach to employment and HRM, the differences are not too large to question them constituting one case study. The less heterogenous findings from the data analysis (see chapters 6 and 7) also justifies integrating the two organisations into one single case study.

²² Led and driven by the central and local governments, the intention of mixed ownership reform is to bring the market mechanism to SOEs, thereby enhancing organisational competitiveness and improving performance. While the implantation of private equity does not change the nature of ownership and the SOEs remain affiliated to the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), it does help to break down any barriers to development including the establishment of effectively-balanced and equally-protecting legal person governance structure, market-oriented talent mechanism, long-term incentive mechanism, and effective daily supervision (Deloitte, 2015). For example, the people management may be inclined to shift towards strategical HRM with a prior focus on HRD.

5.4.2 Fieldwork overview

This section presents an overview of the research fieldwork including its preparation and how it was conducted in order to explore the research's credibility, transparency and ethics.

5.4.2.1 The overview of the fieldwork process

The research fieldwork began after the project's ethical application was approved in August 2016 (see Appendix A). The secondary documentation and primary empirical data were collected over 11 months from September 2016 to July 2017. A timeline of the data collection is presented in Table 5. The fieldwork overall was conducted strictly according to the university's ethical and research codes of conduct and procedures.

Research access was obtained with a supportive endorsement from the executives of both case organisations. The HR departments supported the researcher to undertake both the survey and interviews, despite the fact that access to internal organisational documents was not granted. As a result, 500 and 23 eligible candidates were chosen from both companies to participate in the survey and interview respectively, from which 312 responded to the survey (62%), and all 23 participants agreed to be interviewed. The sample details will be presented in section 5.5.

Table 5 Timeline of data collection

Data collection phase	Date of collection
Documentary research	September 2016
Online survey pilot tests (10 participants)	October 2016
The online survey (312 participants)	October 2016
Individual semi-structure interview pilot tests (3 participants)	November 2016
Individual semi-structure interviews (20 participants)	November-December 2016
Individual semi-structured interviews (3 participants)	July 2017

(1) Documentary process

For the documentary research, the researcher intended to collect the WLB-related external and internal documents. The relevant external documents were collected, including the legal regulations and provisions from Chinese labour law, labour contract law, union law, government pronouncements and proceedings, and public institutional reports from international organisations. The collection and organisation of these documents helped as important background information to help understand WLB issues in terms of Chinese social-economic development, labour legislation and policy intervention, employment relations, work and family responsibilities. Crucially notably it helped to establish the framework of Chinese 'work-life balance regulations and provisions', which in turn, acted as the fundamental benchmark to measure the availability and effectiveness of WLBPPs for employees.

Except for the public sources for external use (the organisations' internet sites), the researcher was unable to access the organisational documents (e.g. HR and employment policy documents and procedures). This led to data omissions, especially in recognising the formal and institutionalised approaches to work-life management. However, it did not become a critical research limitation for the following two reasons. First, a significant amount of WLB literature states work-life management is an alien concept within Chinese organisational HRM (Lu, 2015). Secondly, the empirical responses both from the research participants indicate the scarcity of formal WLBPPs at the organisational level. For example, one of the HR managers mentioned in the interview, "considering the complex organisational composition and a variety of the workforce; HRM is not strategically designed for all subsidiaries and departments; the subordinate institutions have considerable discretion on people management including managing employees' WLB." In order to compensate for this omission, internal organisational information was

indirectly collected and reflected on during the second interview period. This also highlighted the strength of data triangulation.

(2) Survey process

Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, the researcher implemented the following procedures to guarantee the rigour of the questionnaire. First, the data were collected using an online questionnaire containing 20 questions (see the full version in Appendix B). The majority of these questions used 5-point Likert scales from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” to capture participants’ views. The other questions asked for factual information such as working hours and demographical items. The questions and scales used in the questionnaire had been contextualised and developed from established scales extensively tested in WLB research (e.g. Brough et al., 2014; French, 2014). In addition, the initial questionnaire was in English before being translated into Chinese as the survey language, and a translation-back-translation procedure was used to ensure the accuracy of the translation (Brislin et al., 1973). Discrepancies between the original version and the back-translation version were identified and revised by bilingual researchers (the researcher and another bilingual scholar in the supervision team) to ensure semantic equivalence.

Secondly, a group of 10 eligible participants was recruited to undertake a pilot study. This contributed to improving questions, the survey format and scales, which are essential to establish content validity (Creswell, 2014). The pilot study was successful insofar as minimal changes were made to the final survey and allowing the survey to be launched shortly afterwards.

Thirdly, with the assistance of the HR department, the survey identified white-collar

employees (professional, skilled and technical positions) working in these two case organisations through simple random sampling. It was noted, due to data/access restrictions (e.g. the employment structure of each SOE is unknown), that the randomisation may not lead to a representative sample from the population for the purpose of data generalisation in the organisations. Therefore, the viability checks were also conducted on the sample to establish the degree to which the sample could be generalised in section 5.6. The HR department then helped to send the web link for the online survey and the invitation to participate and the consent form through their internal network to 500 eligible individuals (250 participants for each organisation). This was done twice to elicit a higher response rate.

The survey was administrated through a professional online survey platform ‘Wenjuanxin’ on an entirely anonymous and voluntary basis. The web link for this online survey included a statement that informed the participant that if they submitted the survey they would be regarded as having provided informed consent to participate; but that they could exit the survey at any point prior to the final ‘submit’ click point and they would have be viewed as having withdrawn consent. When participants got to the end of the survey and clicked ‘submit’ then consent was assumed, and participants were no longer able to withdraw from the study because the survey was anonymous. After the survey data collection, the collected data were inputted to SPSS for data analysis. The results of the survey data collection will be shown in section 5.5.1.

(3) Interview process

Upon completion of the survey, the preliminary results served to inform the development of interview questions. The interview structure was tested in the pilot interviews with

three candidates separately. This process was conducted smoothly and helped to obtain information about the organisational structure, history and main business objectives, allowing the interview questions to be refined and contextualised (see the full version in Appendix C) in the situation where the internal organisational documents were unavailable. All the interviewees were recruited purposefully with the assistance of HR departments according to the research aims and the availability of interviewees. As Creswell (2014) suggests, purposefully sampling will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions. In addition, the interview data were gathered in two phases. The second follow-up phase was used to test the data saturation and enrich the data robustness. The few new themes coming out from the second phase of interviews led the researcher to conclude that increasing the interview sample size would not help to generate more themes: namely that data saturation had been reached. More details of the interviews and the interview data will be presented in section 5.5.2.

5.4.2.2 Ethical considerations

Research ethics includes consideration of the following issues when planning, conducting, communicating and publishing research: avoiding the risk of harm; autonomy and informed consent; privacy; and confidentiality and anonymity (Punch, 2014). This research protocol was reviewed and approved by Keele University Research Ethics Committee in August 2016 after the application had been submitted in July.

The ethical issues envisaged in this research were mainly regarding the consent to use the data, anonymity and confidentiality and data security. Prior to research participating, potential research subjects were informed of the purpose of the research, the form the survey and interviews would take and confirmation that their identity would not be

revealed. Individuals' participation was voluntary, and informed consent was assured by participants agreeing and signing off the informed consent forms in the two phases respectively (see appendix D). Furthermore, at the beginning of the interview, verbal permission to record the interview was sought.

The anonymity was guaranteed both for the individuals and the organisations participating in the research. There was no identifying information about the individual revealed in written or oral communication. Taking advantage of the online survey, the respondent's identity cannot be traced (Anderson, 2009), while the organisations and interviewees' names were replaced by the combination of a capital letter and numerical identifiers (e.g. A1 stands for the first participant who was interviewed in Company A) when referring to the participants and recording their quotes in the finding chapters. Any reported official information and data shown in the background section 5.4.1 were gathered from published sources and official public websites. Data like revenue and the number of staff were approximated to hide the identities of the two case organisations. Regarding data security, all the raw data, including the questionnaire dataset, interviewee records and signed informed consent forms, were stored securely on a password protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet respectively. The guarantee was provided and kept that only the researcher was able to access the research data. After this period of storage, the data will be securely disposed in line with the university ethics code of practice.

Overall, with the appropriate preparation and awareness of ethical concerns, the research fieldwork process ran effectively and smoothly, providing ethically obtained and robust data to be analysed. The next section will present the research samples and outline the data obtained and how the data were analysed.

5.5 Data collection and analysis

The research data were collected primarily through online surveys and semi-structured interviews. A total of 312 questionnaires were received from white-collar employees, representing a response rate of 62.4%; interviews were conducted with 23 employees and managers. It is noted that although each method proceeded separately and sequentially, the data analysis was cross-triangulated by themes to address the research questions. The details of data collection and analysis for each procedure are shown below.

5.5.1 Survey characteristics

5.5.1.1 Participants and data collection

The online survey was conducted, drawing upon a sample population of 500 white-collar employees in the two case organisations. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. From all collected 347 questionnaires, 35 responses were removed due to incomplete submission²³, which resulted in a final sample of 312 participants, representing a valid response rate of approximately 62.4%. The sample size of 312 can be identified as an appropriate sample as it is five times higher than the total number of the questions (i.e. 20) (Steven, 1996). Also, Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) and Field (2013) suggest a sample size of 300 or more can be a standard that leads to statistical power and generalisability. The profile of the survey respondents is shown in Table 6 below. A more detailed demographic breakdown can be found in section 5 of Appendix B.

²³ Incomplete data occurs because the survey respondents were offered the opportunity to withdraw the questionnaire and the incomplete submissions are treated as cases of withdrawal of consent.

Table 6 Profile of research participants of the survey (n=312)

Age	32 years old on average Range from 22 to 55 years old	Gender	46.8% Male 53.2% Female
Education	18.6% College 60.3% Bachelor Degree 19.9% Master Degree 1.3% Doctoral Degree	Marital status	47.1% Single 52.9% Married
Job role	40.1% of Employees 59.9% of Managers: Of which: 35.6% Line managers 21.5% Middle managers 2.9% Senior managers	Number of children for which the participant has caring responsibilities	58% have 0 38.5% have 1 3.5% have 2
		Youngest child's age	8 years old on average
Job tenure	8 years on average	Number of elderly families for which the participant has caring responsibilities	31.4% have 0 42.3% have 1-2 24.7% have 3-4 1.5% has more than 5

5.5.1.2 Measures

The questionnaire consisted of five sections including working hours and workload, work-life balance issues, work-life balance management (i.e. WLBPPs and WLBC), job performance, and personal characteristics.

Working hours. There were five questions used to measure the working hours drawing on French's (2014) research. These covered contractual and actual working hours, commuting hours, and changes to working hours (“decreased”, “remained the same” and

“increased”) over the past year. This section ended with a multiple-choice question that measures the main reasons for the excessive working hours.

Workload. The issue of workload was measured by three questions developed from French’s (2014) research. The respondents were asked about their perceptions of workload by choosing one answer from items including ‘relaxed’, ‘moderate and under control’, ‘heavy but under control’ and ‘too heavy to control’. Variation in workload conditions over the past year (“decreased”, “remained the same” and “increased”). There was a multiple-choice question for those employees who believed their workload had increased.

Work-life balance (WLB). Considering the under-developed concept of WLB in the Chinese context, the perception was generally assessed by questions focusing upon awareness and familiarity with WLB. Furthermore, the measure of WLB involving 7-items was developed from the widely-validated work-life/family scales (Gutek, 1991; Carlson et al., 2009, and Brough et al., 2014). These items have been tested with samples of employees in China, and their validity have been confirmed in the Chinese context (Timms, et al., 2015). The response options for both sets of questions were 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Reliability²⁴ for this construct was estimated at 0.80.

Work-life balance policies and practices (WLBPPs). The construct of WLBPPs used here was developed from French (2014), and Beauregard and Henry’s (2009) research which

²⁴ Cronbach Alpha is used in this research to test the reliability for each scale variable. It is a reliability test conducted within SPSS in order to measure the internal consistency of the measuring each scale. It is most commonly used when the questionnaire is developed using Likert scale statements and therefore to determine if the scale is reliable or not. Generally, the coefficient of Cronbach Alpha exceeds the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability (Hair et al., 2006).

assesses the availability, usage, and perceived effectiveness of WLBPPs. The WLBPPs were categorised into six sub-scales, including regulation of working hours; leave entitlement; social security systems; flexible working arrangements; workload management; and personal and family life support. Respondents were asked to choose between 1 (do not know), 2 (not available), 3 (available), 4 (available and have used) and 5 (available used and found useful) respectively. This measure showed satisfactory reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.89.

Work-life balance context (WLBC). Work-life balance context was constructed by three sub-scales including organisational (6-item), managerial (2-item) and collegial (2-item) support developed from Dikker et al. (2007). Reliability for the three sub-scale were 0.72, 0.79 and 0.77, constituting the satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha of 0.76 in total. The sample questions for each sub-scale required respondents indicated the extent of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagrees) to 5 (strongly agree).

Job performance. Job performance was measured with six items of in-role performance (IrP) derived from Williams and Anderson (1991), and four items of extra-role performance (ErP) derived from Lynch et al., (1999). The level of reliability was with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87 for the whole construct, and a Cronbach's Alpha for IrP of 0.82 and for ErP of 0.75. The response options for questions were 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagrees) to 5 (strongly agree).

Controls. In order to minimise spurious results caused by demographic variables, a number of influential variables have been controlled in previous work–life research (e.g., Grzywacz and Butler, 2005; Hammer et al., 2005). Given that, gender, age, education,

marital status, number of children and elderly cared for by the family, job tenure and job position were employed as controls in this analysis. The coding details for categories of each variable can be found in section 5 of Appendix B.

5.5.1.3 Data analysis

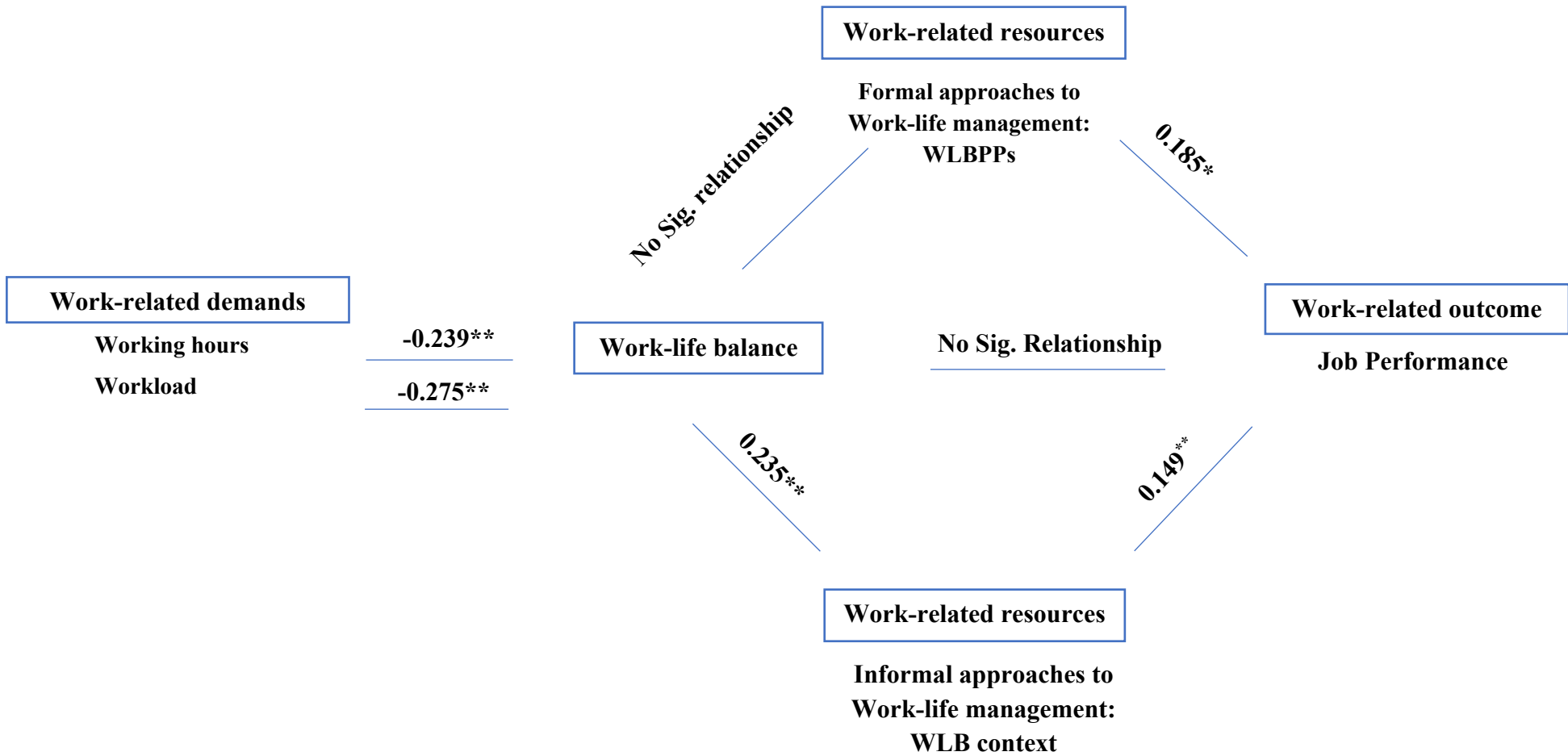
The survey data were organised and analysed using SPSS. All collected survey responses were converted into an SPSS dataset for an initial examination to ensure data reliability and validity. The examination included the exclusion of incomplete submissions, reliability tests, factor analysis (validity test) and Harman's single factor analysis (for common method bias), and normality test (test the goodness of fit of a model to the data). As a result, the initial examination shows the collected dataset was satisfactory, which laid a foundation to proceed with further statistical analysis. Given that, the statistical techniques applied included descriptive and correlation analysis, t-tests and a one-way ANOVA to interpret the theoretical research framework and address the research questions. Details of each statistical analysis are articulated as follows.

Frequency and descriptive analyses. Frequency and descriptive statistics were generated to describe employees' working conditions and WLB issues in this research. To be specific, the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values for each variable were calculated, and unusual values in the data probed. The brief overview of the descriptive statistics is provided in Table 7 (below), and details are appropriately presented and described in the finding chapters 6 and 7.

Table 7 The descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations (survey data)

	Mean	S.D	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Gender	1.53	.50	-.16	-1.99	-														
2. Age	2.12	.74	.78	.73	-.123*	-													
3. Job position	1.87	.85	.56	-.63	-.014	.422*	-												
4. Eeducation	3.04	.66	.27	.15	.038	-.173**	.005	-											
5. Job tenure	2.63	1.19	.68	-.44	-.121*	.741*	.449*	-.282**	-										
6. Marital status	1.53	.50	-.07	-2.02	-.087	.555*	.332*	-.192**	.662*	-									
7. Number of children	1.46	.57	.88	-.25	-.111	.563*	.315*	-.208**	.670*	.751*	-								
8. Number of elderlies	1.96	.80	.26	-.78	-.068	.324*	.275*	-.047	.466*	.519*	.491*	-							
9. Working hours	3.26	.83	.72	.21	-.096	-.041	.029	-.009	.030	.007	.046	.150*	-						
10. Commuting hours	1.99	.96	.73	-.41	-.018	.068	.024	.010	.073	.138*	.135*	.174*	.118*	-					
11. Perceived workload	2.60	.59	-.07	-.28	.062	.131*	.122*	-.011	.207*	.085	.152*	.138*	.369*	.152*	-				
12. WLB	2.98	.63	.24	-.48	.101	.042	-.024	.094	.012	.002	-.018	-.085	-.239**	-.051	-.275**	-			
13. WLBPPs	3.14	.55	.66	.74	-.126	-.131	-.001	.049	-.110	-.063	-.024	.039	-.127	.003	-.235**	-.116	-		
14. WLBC	3.13	.54	-.70	.49	.409	-.074	-.098	.017	-.155**	-.034	-.078	-.042	-	-.065	-.323**	.235**	.255**	-	
15. Job performance	4.12	.42	.48	-.06	.067	.110	.121*	-.023	.089	.111	.158*	.068	.067	.134*	.061	.021	.185**	.149**	-

Figure 8 Bivariate correlations assessing relationships within the theoretical framework



It is noted that the data presented in Table 7 conforms to the normal distribution according to the statistics of kurtosis and skewness. The statistics of kurtosis and skewness show the degree of variation in the distributions of each variable. According to the widely acknowledged indicators from Hair et al. (2006), the statistics of kurtosis and skewness within ± 1.96 for $p = 0.05$ can be considered as normally distributed. In the table, all the skewness and kurtosis coefficients range between -1.96 and 1.96 except for the two variables - the kurtosis of gender and marital status are slightly out of the range.

Correlations analysis Correlation analysis is a method of statistical evaluation used to study the strength of a relationship between statistical variables. Pearson's (for scale and linear variables such as WLB) and Spearman's correlation (for ordinal variables such as working time) were applied to test the correlations between the variables.

Both Table 7 and Figure 8 show the bivariate correlations for the main variables from the survey data. Work-related demands, namely working hours and workload, are found to be negatively correlated to WLB ($r = -.239^{**}$ and $r = -.275^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). While there is a positive correlation between WLB and informal work-life management (WLBC) ($r = .235^{**}$, $p < 0.01$), the relationship between formal policies and practice (WLBPPs) and WLB is not statistically significant. Finally, there is no statistically significant relationship between WLB and work-related outcomes (job performance). These null relationship between WLB and job performance made it difficult to establish the expected causality between work demands and work resources, WLB, and job performance as the JD-R model suggests.

The correlation statistics do not, therefore, back up the deductive assumptions made in the theoretical model. As a result, it was decided not to adopt multivariable regression analysis aimed at providing a more nuanced and detailed statistical analysis of causal relationships among variables in the statistic sense. This analysis of the survey sample was restricted to examining the inter-correlation relationships between variables, instead of exploring the construct relationship of ‘antecedents-WLB-outcomes’ by conducting structural equation modelling (SEM). Considering correlation analysis has relatively weak explanatory power to interpret the inter-relationships between variables, this analysis utilises the qualitative data to explain the causality between variables. This is because the interview data are effective in explaining the causalities with robust information on Chinese WLB issues at the multi-layered level. This will be further justified in sections 5.5.2 and 5.6 where the qualitative data are briefly presented and the advantages of using qualitative data are highlighted, respectively.

Surprisingly, there are no significant correlations between WLB and demographic variables, which appears contrary to the widely reported findings from work–life/family research (Grzywacz and Butler, 2005; Hammer et al., 2005). Those researches indicate individual demographic differences are influential factors in influencing WLB. In order to further test the effect of demographic factors on WLB, independent t-tests for the dichotomous variables (e.g. gender) and a one-way ANOVA for the multi-class variable (e.g. age) were then conducted, as illustrated in the following section.

T-tests and one-way ANOVA test. These two tests were employed as a supplementary analysis to examine the effects of demographic-related variables on WLB: namely whether there are mean differences of WLB in terms of gender (male/female), job position (staff/manager),

marital status (single/married), childcare (have/does not have) elderly care (have/does not have), age (all range of age groups), education attainment (all range of educational levels) and job tenure (all range of years of service). Job position, childcare, elderly care primarily measured as multi-class demographic variables were transformed into new dichotomous variables for the t-test. However, the multi-class “age”, “education attainment” and “job tenure” categories were kept and applied in one-way ANOVA tests.

As presented in Table 8 (below), the t-test results show that gender, job position, marital status, and childcare have no significant difference in the effect of employees’ WLB. Likewise, the one-way ANOVA tests show no significant difference in WLB for respondents with different age groups, educational levels and job tenure. The only significant variable is elderly care, namely, whether an individual has elderly care demands are related to their WLB. Most WLB research, both in the western and non-western context, indicates that dependent elderly can be a demand that impacts on individuals’ WLB (Beauregard, and Henry, 2009; Lu and Cooper, 2015). In addition, considering there are categorical variables existing in the survey, the chi-squared test (χ^2 test) was also employed to determine whether significant differences between the categorical variables existed (e.g. gender, marital status, workload). As no statistically significant relationships arose from these chi-square tests, there is no detailed data analysis presented in this section.

**Table 8 The mean difference of the main demographical variables on WLB
(survey data)**

		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	T-test	
					T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	Male	146	2.9163	.64347	-1.636	.103
	Female	166	3.0335	.62045		
Job position	Staff	125	2.9911	.60177	.284	.776
	Manager	187	2.9703	.65454		
Marital status	Single	147	2.9796	.62921	.025	.980
	Married	165	2.9778	.63831		
Childcare	Have	181	2.9920	.63452	.439	.661
	Do not have	131	2.9601	.63292		
Elderly care	Have	98	3.0941	.66194	2.194	.029*
	Do not have	214	2.9258	.61368		
<hr/>						
		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	One-way ANOVA	
					F.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Age	under 25	49	2.9456	.64475	.174	.914
	26-35	196	2.9722	.63778		
	36-45	48	3.0093	.62259		
	46-55	19	3.0526	.62016		
Educational level	College	58	2.8879	.52818	1.563	.198
	Bachelor	188	2.9654	.64071		
	Master	62	3.1065	.61587		
	Doctor	4	2.7250	.57373		
Job tenure	Under 2 years	48	3.0671	.64656	.558	.693
	2-5 years	125	2.9218	.65537		
	6-10 years	63	2.9824	.55813		
	11-20 years	46	2.9976	.62437		
	Over 20 years	30	3.0370	.69379		
Note: N=312; *p<0.05						

Considering the lack of statistically significant relationships between demographical variables and WLB, work characteristics rather than demographic characteristics may be a focus in this WLB research. However, it is noted that this single set of survey results does not necessarily negate the widely recognised argument that WLB is associated with their

demographical factors. Taking gender as an example, WLB is a traditionally gendered topic, especially for females in a paternalistic Chinese society (Ling and Power, 2001; Choi, 2008; Coffey et al., 2009). While the first t-test in Table 8 showed an insignificant difference between female and male groups on their perceived WLB and may challenge the conventional gendered discourse for Chinese employees, it can by no means signify the arrival of a gender equality era. This issue was left to be clarified and explored in the interviews.

5.5.2 Semi-structured interview procedure

5.5.2.1 Participants and data collection

Following the survey and pilot interviews, 23 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with 9 employees and 14 managers in the case organisations through generic purposive sampling. A profile of the interviewees is shown in Table 9, and more details can be found in the Appendix E. These interviews were conducted in Chinese for approximately 45-90 minutes and averaged 75 min in length, during business hours in an office location. All the interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed based on agreed and signed ethical consent forms (see Appendix D). In order to assist the data collection, fieldwork notes were taken throughout the whole interview process to chronicle the researcher's perceptions and experience (an example of recorded reflection is shown in section 5.6.2).

While the interview sample was skewed towards managers, it is noted that only one senior manager (B1 COO in company B) participated, representing the employer's standpoint on employees' WLB. The majority were middle and line managers who expressed their views

from both managerial and employees' perspectives. On the one hand, the managerial roles involved decision-making and supervisory responsibilities for employees' WLB; on the other, they are employees who experience work-life management issues arising from the upper management. The senior managers' views, as the organisation's representatives, tend to be more salient to strategic HRM issues, while middle and line managers are more likely to help contextualise HR decisions and delivering HR practices. Consequently, the data analysis will not simply separate the participants' perspectives according to their job title and level. but will be based upon the identities they assumed in the interview.

Table 9 Profile of the interview participants (n=23)

Age	41 years old on average Range from 29 to 53 years old		
Gender	34.8% Male 65.2% Female	Marital status	8.7% Single 91.3% Married
Education	4.3% College 78.3% Bachelor Degree 13.1% Master Degree 4.3% Doctoral Degree	The number of dependent children	21.7% has 0 69.6% has 1 8.7% has 2
		Age of youngest child	14 years old on average
Job position	60.1% Managers 39.9% Employees	The number of dependent elderly families	13.1% has 0 30.4% has 1-2 56.5% has 3-4

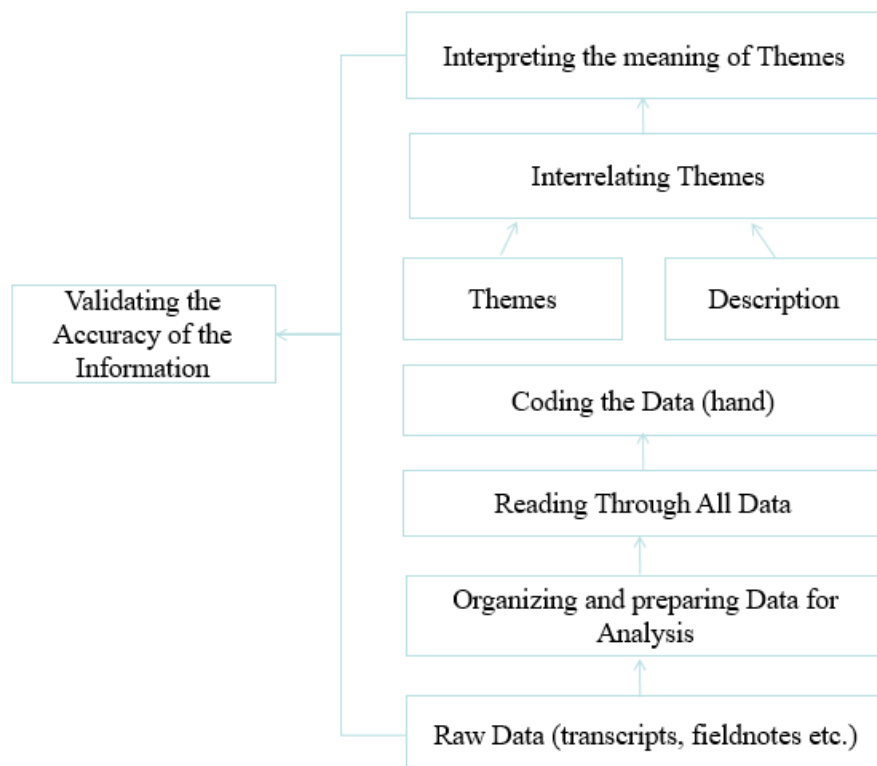
5.5.2.2 Data analysis

Thematic coding analysis is employed to interpret the interview data and explore the underlying norms and rules of human behaviour (Joffe and Yardley, 2004). This involves identifying and labelling patterns in data that are relevant to the specific research questions (Gibbs, 2008). In this research, as the analysis progressed, the main themes were created to

address the employees' perceptions and perceived experience of WLB, and formal (WLBPPs) and informal (WLBC) approaches to work-life management at the organisational level.

This research proceeded with thematic analysis generally following the linear and hierarchical approach suggested by Creswell (2014:197) in Figure 9. This approach helped to produce a template with a tree-like structure of themes and subthemes. In the stage of the coding preparation, the raw data was read and organised including the transcribing interviews, optically scanning a copy of materials, typing up the field notes, and sorting and arranging the data. The preparation process provided the researcher with a general sense of information and opportunities to reflect on its overall meaning.

Figure 9 Data analysis in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014:197)



The analysis process involved coding the transcripts and then identifying themes by gathering relevant codes. Open coding and axis coding were employed to organise the data. In the open coding, the phenomena described in the original information was conceptualised. For example, a5 and B5²⁵ expressed the similar view that “Work and life are inseparable and complementary.”, which can be conceptualised as work-life integration. Consequently, a broad list of themes began to emerge from openly coding the raw data across the cases into concepts (Glaser et al., 1999). It is essential to retain informant terms where possible, and these can be labelled or described as themes (Gioia et al., 2013). For instance, “humanised care” can be labelled as an informal Chinese approach to work-life management as it was frequently mentioned when interviewees were talking about the way their organisation and managers were concerned about their work-life issues.

Open coding was followed by axial coding that was applied to reduce and group the interrelated themes. The new themes emerging from the previous codes/subthemes were synthesised, and each theme contained a specific meaning within the interview data. For example, interviewees mentioned "relatively balanced", "not too bad", "tend to be a balance" when reporting the perceived WLB, so that Chinese employees' overall work-life experiences can be synthesised as "a relatively positive WLB". It is noted that the development of themes and their labels were an iterative process, and saturation was reached once further rounds of iteration between the data and the emerging themes failed to generate any additional categories (Creswell, 2014). Last but not least, the coding scheme was reviewed and discussed with the supervision team to validate the accuracy of information.

²⁵ Code names in capital represent managers; in lower case represent employees.

After these coding processes, the themes and subthemes were finalised as is shown in Table 10. The themes were mapped out from four main categories to address the research questions and explain the theoretical framework: the perceptions of WLB; the perceived experience of WLB; WLB policies and practices; and WLB context. These themes helped to triangulate survey findings for the purpose of addressing the research questions and explaining the theoretical framework. On the one hand, the majority of interviewees expressed similar views to the survey findings and helped clarify issues of causality in depth. On the other, considering that a survey is difficult method to use to capture employees' perceptions of WLB in depth and breadth, interview data contributes to generating diverse and dynamic perspectives of understanding WLB with regard to different demographic factors such as job role, seniority, working patterns and circumstances. Accordingly, the influence of demographics on individuals' WLB cannot be omitted, even though the survey data did not indicate its significance.

Prior to unfolding the triangulated results in detail in findings chapters 6 and 7, this the remaining section of the chapter will evaluate the research process, considering research quality through a reflexive approach.

Table 10 Themes of qualitative analysis (interview data)

Themes	Themes description	Subthemes	Subthemes description
Perceptions of WLB	Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB	WLB at the individual level	Emerging awareness but limited recognition of WLB Diverse views of WLB with work orientation, integrative domination and dynamic of social-demographics (e.g. gender, life course)
		WLB at the organisational level	The marginalisation of WLB; Work domination
		WLB at the national/regional level	Economic development and pressures, institutional facilitation and hindrance, collective socio-cultural values
Perceived experiences of WLB	Chinese employees' experiences of WLB	Overall work-life experiences	A relatively positive WLB; WLB in satisfaction but not in time and involvement
		Work-related demands	Working hour/workload and its relationship to WLB
		Work-related outcomes	Job performance and their relationship to WLB
WLB policies and practices	The institutional regulations, policies, and practices to improve WLB in Chinese organisations	The availability of WLB policies and practices for employees	The availability of WLB policies: legislative regulation and policies provision; its resources and barriers The availability of WLB practices: organisational policies and practices; its resources and barriers
		The effectiveness of WLBPPs for employees	The reason for the insignificant relationship between WLBPPs and employees' WLB The lower level of usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs The barriers existing in the availability, usage, and effectiveness of WLBPPs
		The effectiveness of WLBPPs for organisations	The positive relationship between WLBPPs and job performance The barriers to achieving the effectiveness of WLBPPs for organisations
WLB context	Contextual support for improving employees' WLB in Chinese organisations	The construction of the WLB context	Organisational support and hindrance; Managerial informal support; collegial interpersonal helping
		The effectiveness of WLB context for employees	Symbolic organisational support Substantial but informal managerial support
		The effectiveness of WLB context for organisations	The double-edged impacts of organisational and managerial support on employees' reciprocal behaviour

5.6 The evaluation of research quality

Research quality can be evaluated by the degree to which the research data obtained are relevant, credible and trustworthy (Anderson, 2009). Given that, this section will assess the reliability and validity of the quantitative and qualitative research processes respectively; evaluate the research generalisation by examining the likelihood of the results being obtained in other settings. This is followed by the reflexive section considering research bias and methodological limitations.

5.6.1 The evaluation of reliability, validity, and generalisation

5.6.1.1 Reliability and validity

The measurement of reliability and validity for quantitative and qualitative data are different, which result in a separate evaluation for each type of research. Despite that, overall, the validity and reliability of this research primarily benefited from the use of mixed methods. Data triangulation can test the degree of cross/external validation between methods (Jick, 1979). The public documentation collected provided a Chinese institutional and cultural context and some background information on the two case organisations to scope WLB issues in China. This significantly helped to refine and contextualise the questions used in the questionnaire. The 312 valid survey responses provide insights into Chinese employees' perceptions and experience of WLB, allowing a more specific picture of WLB issues with regard to the work demands and resources to be analysed. Significantly, the informative, explanatory and exploratory interview findings help to check the consistency of the survey data as well as providing robust data themselves. These cross-integrated triangulating processes are conducive to the research enhancement of validity and reliability and thereby largely ensuring the research quality. Quantitative reliability refers to what extent similar results would be obtained on all similar occasions. In quantitative research, the reliability is related to issues of

consistency of measurement. Evaluating reliability is a measure of whether the indicators that construct the scale and items of variables are consistent, where three aspects need to be assessed: stability, internal reliability and inter-observer (Bryman, 2011). First, the way of testing stability is the test-retest method. The stability seems difficult to be assumed in the WLB research. Since the issues of WLB can vary chronologically, respondents could give different (inconsistent) responses at two-time points of the investigation. However, WLB researchers tend to accept it as part of social nature and suggest longitudinal research to trace these dynamic (Brough et al., 2014; Lu and Cooper, 2015). Secondly, the vital issue of assessing internal reliability is whether the scale of each variable consistently reflects the measure. In order to ensure satisfactory reliability of the questionnaire, the scales and items involved established questions and measures, developed from existing research for initial internal consistency. Moreover, the internal consistency of responses was measured prior to the formal data analysis, and all the coefficients of Cronbach Alpha exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability (Hair et al., 2006). Regarding the inter-observer consistency, while it seems inevitable that subjective judgment may be involved in the questionnaire translation, only the researcher was mainly responsible for such activities, which reduced the risk of lacking consistency in decisions. Although the other bilingual scholar in the supervision team checked the translation, it only ensured semantic equivalence rather than increasing inconsistency.

Quantitative validity refers to “the issue of whether an indicator that is devised to gauge a concept measures that concept” (Bryman, 2011: 170). This quantitative research considered three types of validity, including construct validity, internal validity, and external validity. Primarily, construct validity is seen as the overriding objective in

validity. It focuses on whether “a measure is devised of a concept [WLB] reflects the concept that is supposed to be denoting” (Bryman, 2011: 47). In the questionnaire, each item and scale used to reflect the variables were developed and refined from the existing empirical WLB research to establish the initial validity. Prior to the data collection, the validity of the items was not only reviewed by the research supervision team but also piloted for validation. Afterwards, each scale was assessed by factor analysis. All the indices of variables were within the recommended range, meaning that the dataset has acceptable construct validity. Secondly, internal validity mainly relates to the issue of causality among the dependent and independent variables (Bryman, 2016). The survey was conducted in the pharmaceutical sector, which decreased the ambiguity about the direction of causal influence compared to a cross-sectional design. However, considering the issues of WLB are laden with the contextual characteristics, the causal inferences among variables were not highlighted in the quantitative data. Instead, examining the causality between variables is supplemented and interpreted by the qualitative data. The final factor was external validity, whether the survey result could be generalised beyond the specific research context. This will be examined in the next section about generalisation.

The meanings of reliability and validity in qualitative research are somewhat different from quantitative research. Qualitative researchers view reliability as the researcher’s approach that is consistent across different researchers and different projects (Gibbs, 2007). The internal and external reliability are concerned with qualitative research. The internal reliability relates to the dependability of qualitative research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). It entails all the accessible records (e.g., interview question formulation, participants’ selection and fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decision.)

need to be traceable. This research had these records organised and secured, and the supervision team audited these to ensure internal reliability to a large extent. Comparatively, the external reliability refers to the replicability of the research, which seems difficult to achieve in social science research, this research included. As LeCompte and Goetz (1982) argue the dilemma is that both the social setting and circumstances are impossible to freeze, so the issues of WLB as a socially constructed phenomenon are difficult to be replicable to other settings and contexts.

Qualitative validity is mainly made up of credibility (parallels internal validity) and transferability (parallels external validity) (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Concerning the credibility, Golafshani (2003: 600) states “while the credibility in quantitative research depends on instrument construction, the researcher is the instrument' in qualitative research.” This indicates the credibility depends on the ability and effort of the researcher. Namely, how close are the results interpreted by the researcher to social reality (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Creswell (2014) suggest strategies for improving the internal validity of a qualitative study that include triangulation; using internal or external auditors; peer debriefing; a clear exposition of methods and data analysis; reflexivity; and attention to negative or discrepant information. This research conducted data triangulation in terms of data sources and methods, the supervision team checked and audited the data, the methods and data analysis are clearly demonstrated in section 5.5, and there is a reflexive review of the research below. These procedures contributed to enhancing academic credibility and rigour to a large extent. In terms of research transferability, while 23 interviews did not present a big group of data, it does not necessarily undermine the data transparency. Bryman (2011) claims that qualitative data is oriented to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world. The depth rather than

breadth is of value to draw upon the external validity. The in-depth interviews were conducted in the research lasting, 45-90 minutes each, which created robust data to make judgments about the possible transferability of findings to another context.

5.6.1.2 Generalisation

This research may have the scope for wider generalisation as a pioneer of WLB research in large-scale Chinese companies. The research was conducted in two pharmaceutical SOEs that represented features of the China-based enterprise under the transition from the traditional personnel management to the strategic HRM. Findings from the two case organisations produce findings from which inferences relating to employees' perceptions of WLB and the work-life management approaches in the Chinese workplace could be made.

However, it is prudent to be cautious about concluding too much in terms of the generalisation of this research. While the survey data fit the normal distribution and analysis of the interviews indicates data saturation, the small samples (312 survey responses and 23 interviews) will not provide sufficient information to generalise this to Chinese employees in all sectors. This leaves the question as to whether the discourse and practices of WLB in China would be different for the other types of employees, organisations, sectors and regions. More broadly, the national contextual factors may also question the transferability of the results to other national contexts. Given that representativeness of the sample is a proxy for the robustness of the research, this research overall can be said to lack generalisability. Nevertheless, it is not a research limitation that critically impact on the research quality. As Cooke (2018) contends that “generalisability” may not be a key criterion to assess the quality of each study, especially

for case studies. Case study research has the potential to reveal rich contexts and enrich our understanding of what is happening (or happened), why, and what is specific to the organisation and people studied. From this sense, there are some elements of the research suitable for generalisation.

5.6.2 Research bias

There are various types of biases identified in the research literature, mainly including selection bias, measurement biases and personal bias (Hartman et al., 2002). This section will identify these types of research bias and demonstrate the efforts taken to minimise them.

5.6.2.1 Selection bias

Selection bias is commonly manifested as the volunteer or referral bias. It occurs when individuals who volunteer or are referred to participate in a study are different from the non-volunteers/non-referrals (ibid.). Such bias is possible in this research as the participants in both organisations were referred by gatekeepers, the respective HR departments, although the participants voluntarily participated in the research. It can raise issues of risk in terms of data credibility. If the participants were sensitive to the possible power and administrative pressures, these participants might attempt to hide some negative views and give more positive and less considered responses to questions about their work conditions. In order to minimise the risk, the researcher applied the ethical procedures strictly, thus attempting to release any psychological pressures that arose from the 'administrative conduct of the HR department.' It was noticed that both survey and interviewee participants were willing to take a serious and honest approach toward the research. The survey data includes very few missing values, and the majority of interviews lasted over one hour. The interviewees dedicated considerable time to share

their perspectives, expecting that their views would awaken organisational concerns about employees' WLB and, consequently, benefit themselves. The evidence helped to indicate selection bias may not be a critical limitation of this research.

5.6.2.2 Measurement bias

One of the most important aspects of measurement bias that needed to be considered was participants' bias, which was evident in the self-reported questionnaire. In terms of survey content, the self-reported job performance scales used in the survey can be the most disputed. Existing research suggests that self-reporting cannot be used as a direct surrogate for objective performance measures (Pransky et al., 2006; Bommer et al., 1996). By contrast, considering both subjective and objective performance (e.g., from line manager side and organisational outcomes) would have been a better way of providing a more robust measurement of employees' job performance. However, due to the access and practical issues, only the subjective side of job performance was measured in the survey. While this may be imperfect, employees' perceptions of in-role and extra-role performances were both identified in the research undertaken. Furthermore, in order to address this gap, enhance research validity, the adoption of mixed methods again played a significant role. The effort was particularly made to gain robust information to illustrate the causality between employees' performance and organisational development. The executives, managers and employees interviewed all highlighted the significance of employees' job performance to organisational development.

Concerning self-reporting, a common method bias (CMB) may emerge in the research because this bias can affect data that masks the true value of an observed correlation between variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Identifying the sources of the CMB allows to better control for their influence on the data (ibid.). In this research, both procedural and

statistical measures were used to control for the biasing effect. In terms of procedural measures, the survey imposed several remedial ways during the questionnaire design, such as using respondent anonymity protection, question order counterbalance, and improvements, in relation to scale items, after the pilot study. Moreover, since the survey was self-administered, the respondents' uneasiness in facing an interviewer was minimised. Statistically, one of the simplest and most widely used ways to test CMB is Harman's single factor score, in which all items (measuring latent variables) were loaded into one common factor for the examination of internal validity (ibid.). If the total variance for a single factor is less than 50%, it suggests that CMB does not affect the data results (ibid.). Based upon that, all items of the questionnaire were entered into this statistical calculation. The result was 27.84% variance for a single factor, which indicates CMB is not a significant problem for this quantitative data.

5.6.2.3 Personal bias

Good quality research expects the data to be interpreted and analysed in an objective manner that interprets findings based on the evidence and minimises personal bias. This mixed research attempted to achieve such objectivity in both aspects. First, the nature of mixed methods helps to minimise the researcher bias through data triangulation. Secondly, a tactic to deal with researcher bias is reflexivity (Berger, 2015). Primarily, minimising personal bias requires the researcher to acknowledge and understand the existence of self-bias. Reflexivity refers to "sensitivity to the ways in which the researcher and the research process have shaped the collected data, including the role of prior assumptions and experience, which can influence even the most avowedly inductive inquiries" (Mays and Pope, 2000: 51). Namely, interpreting the data after reflection upon the researcher's role provides a better platform to explore the empirical materials, which is conducive to enhancing data credibility. The following example helps explain this argument.

My personal background as a native speaker and local, and the fieldwork reflection contributed to the analysis of the data. For example, the soft environment (i.e., organisations and participants' intellectual responses to this research) and physical environment (indoor workplace facilities and outdoor environment) that I experienced in the fieldwork indirectly shaped my cognition towards the case organisations, in terms of WLB issues. The research commitment and engagement indicated by the endorsement of the executive team, support of the HR department and voluntary participation of employees and managers suggests that the WLB topic is likely to be respected, needed and expected in such an organisational context. Notably, in contrast to the other enterprises which were approached but where access was not secured, these two case organisations might have shown their concerns around WLB issues at the beginning. The gatekeepers from the inaccessible enterprises subtly delivered the underlying reason for the rejection, claiming that the employer does not expect their employees to consider the need for balance between work and life. Namely, the WLB issues are not their concern, and the employer might even fear them being raised because of potential workplace consequences.

Furthermore, when I walked into the prepared office for interviewing, the company's image in relation to the possibility of work-life management started to build up in my mind. Taking company A as an example, the workplace is equipped with the common and leisure areas - coffee bars, cafeterias, lounge rooms - where employees are able to take a break and socialise when needed and appropriate. The outdoor environment including an orchard, garden, man-made lake, running and pedestrian facilities and sports stadium, which can be used for the purpose of exercise, leisure and team-building. The construction of working space and environment may signal the potential availability of a friendly WLB context. Despite that, notably, the financial investment in internal and

external workplace construction may be primarily attributed to the flourishing company development. Strong economic development is bound with employees' efforts. However, it is doubted that under the competitive sectoral environment, whether the employee has time and energy to enjoy the leisure and welfare attached to the facilities while performing well to sustain the company's development. In addition, the newly-built picturesque headquarters are located in the suburb. I have been told the majority of employees working there live in the city. The researcher also lived in the city and experienced around four hours of commute per day when conducting fieldwork at this location. Namely, in order to arrive at the workplace on time, employees face long commuting hours, directly squeezing their non-work time, which they could have spent with families or for personal leisure.

As the above example indicates, while the researcher's reflection may not constitute robust data for the purpose of analysis, this personal reflection can enhance the researcher's objective insights when interpreting the data, which contributes to improving the data credibility.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated, justified and evaluated the research strategy used to conduct the research. The research strategy is underpinned by a pragmatist perspective and utilises mixed methodology research, derived from a deductive theoretical framework. As the nature of WLB is complex, dynamic and multi-layered, pragmatism is drawn upon to offer practical and outcome-oriented perspectives to address WLB issues. Given that, the mixed methodology has the advantage of utilising both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach is used to examine the general picture of WLB in the Chinese workplace (what happened) with the aim of addressing the statistical

relationships located in the theoretical framework. The qualitative approach contributes by seeking to explain the causalities between such relationships thoroughly and enrich the understanding of WLB issues in the Chinese context, possessing both a confirmatory and exploratory dimension (why did it happen and how do solve it?) Furthermore, the research is based upon a single case study of two large SOEs in the pharmaceutical sector. The case study approach contributes to providing this research with a frame to undertake a mixed design for the purpose of exploring WLB issues in the broader Chinese context. The choice of the two pharmaceutical SOEs can make a very intriguing and representative case in discussing employees' WLB issues in China considering the external environment and developmental demands upon management in SOEs.

Having justified the methodological approaches, this chapter presented the research mixed design and the fieldwork undertaken. Regarding the data analysis, documentary research is initially used to scope the national and organisational work-life related issues. The online survey captures the initial picture of WLB perceptions and show the simple inter-relationships between WLB and related variables through correlation statistics. The interview data are transcribed and interpreted through thematic analysis to help explain the causality between variables and enrich the understanding of WLB issues, recognising the multi-layered factors arising from the distinctive Chinese national, regional, organisational and individual context.

The chapter also assesses the research quality in terms of the reliability, validity, generalisation and bias. The process of evaluation indicates the conduct and quality of the research to be satisfactory overall. The quality of the research is attributed, in particular, to the adoption of mixed methods and data triangulation, which allow an

examination and analysis of WLB issues in a non-western context in depth and breadth. (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017).

The analytical framework derived from the theoretical framework (chapter 3) and research questions (chapter 4) contributes to constructing the structure of the following two findings chapters. The first one (chapter 6) focuses on employees' perceptions of WLB underpinned by the conceptual framework of WLB, where the meaning of WLB and exploration of work-related demands and outcomes are identified and explored (Path 1 and 4²⁶). The second (chapter 7) indicates the approaches to work-life management through identifying and exploring formal institutionalised support (i.e. work-life balance policies and practices) and informal contextual support (i.e. work-life balance context) in the Chinese workplace, where the inter-relationships located in the theoretical framework (Paths 2 and 3²⁷) are examined.

²⁶ In the theoretical framework (see the full details in Chapter 3), Path 1 shows the interrelationships between the main work-related demands (i.e. working hours and workload) and employees' WLB; Path 4 looks at the inter-relationship between the main work-related outcome, job performance and employees' WLB.

²⁷ Path 2 shows the interrelationships between the main work-related resources (i.e. WLBPPs and WLBC) and employees' WLB; Path 3 shows the interrelationships between these two resources and job performance.

Chapter Six: Chinese Employees' Perceptions and Experiences of WLB

6.0 Introduction

This is the first findings chapter that focuses on Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB, and their work-life experiences in relation to work demands and the resultant outcome, job performance. It seeks to address the first and two research questions. These findings contribute to empirically testing the conceptual framework of WLB and examining the partial theoretical framework (Path 1 and 4) for this study and are based upon the qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The descriptive statistics and statistical correlations from the survey data paint a picture of Chinese employees' WLB in relation to the main work demands (working time, and workload) and outcomes (job performance). On top of that, the interview data provide more details to interpret the perceptions and experience of WLB and help to explain the causality between employees' WLB and the related factors. It is noted that interview data are interpreted from different self-identified perspectives, instead of directly citing the quotes which identify participants as (either) employees and (or) managers. This is because the interview sample is skewed towards middle and line managers who undertake dual roles as employees and managers. These participants sometimes provided information from a managerial viewpoint, responsible for managing work-life arrangements; sometimes, as employees, they talked about their own work-life experiences affected by their line managers.

The chapter structure is as follows. Section 6.1 will cover the first research question: namely employees' perceptions of WLB and identifying the meaning of WLB in China. The multi-layered conceptual framework of WLB constructed from an overall perspective is adopted as the analytical framework to scope the Chinese understanding of WLB by highlighting an individual's work-life priority (Greenhaus and Allen, 2006,

2011), work demands and resources at organisational level (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007) and the country-level economic, institutional and socio-cultural context (Ollier-Malaterre, 2017). Identifying the meaning of WLB provides a foundation to examine Chinese employees' work-life experiences in section 6.2, where inter-relationships between the main work-related demands and outcomes are explored and explained, underpinned by the theoretical framework. The correlation analysis is used to explain the relationship between working hours and workload and WLB, as well as WLB and job performance. This chapter then finishes with a concluding section 6.3 that summarises the findings, highlights the chapter's contribution and demonstrates how it connects to the next chapter.

6.1 Chinese employees' perceptions of Work-life balance

This section aims to analyse the characteristics of Chinese WLB, with the aim of testing work-life theories, the analytical framework's validity and considering the distinctiveness of WLB in non-western context. According to the literature review, as WLB is a socially constructed concept, the overall-based perspective is adopted to understand Chinese WLB perceptions. It is argued that perceptions of WLB are constructed from individuals' work-life values and views, which are predominately shaped by the organisational demands and resources and influenced by the Chinese economic, institutional, and socio-cultural environment. As a result, the Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB will be analysed at the individual, organisational and national (and regional) level based upon the quantitative and qualitative data.

6.1.1 Individual level: emerging WLB awareness and diverse WLB perceptions

As WLB is traditionally viewed as an individual's set of opinions, this research firstly investigated employee perceptions through their awareness of, and familiarity, with WLB. The research participants expressed their diverse and dynamic viewpoints on WLB.

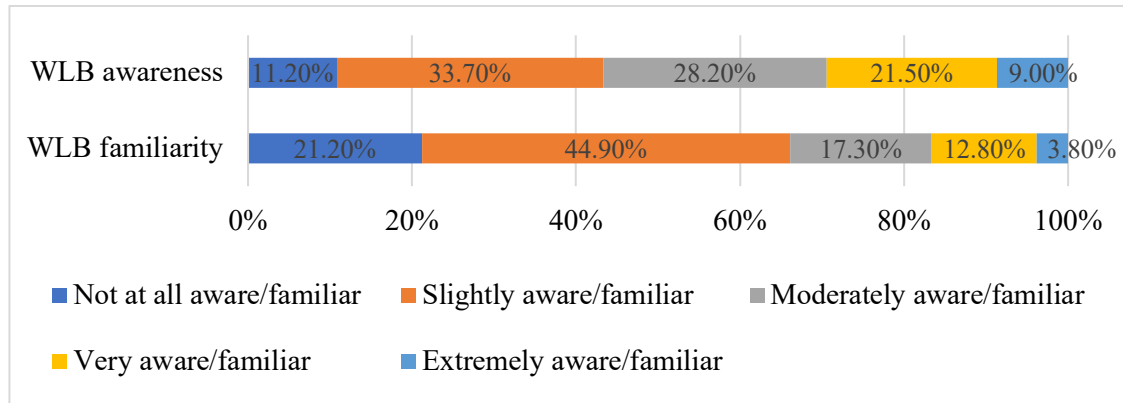
6.1.1.1 Emerging awareness but limited recognition of WLB

The quantitative findings from 312 surveys scratched the surface of WLB perceptions among Chinese employees. Participants were asked to what extent they were aware of and familiar with WLB. As the percentage chart shows in Figure 10 below, few are completely ignorant of the term, and the majority of participants express a certain degree of awareness of and familiarity with WLB. This indicates that WLB has been recognised in China. As is mentioned by one of the interviewees, “work and life seem imbalanced rather than the balance being constant...but we still discuss balance because people are increasingly aware of both the lack of and importance of WLB” (B11²⁸).

However, increasing awareness and familiarity are not progressing at the same pace. The majority of Chinese employees are aware of WLB, but the majority of participants have limited familiarity with WLB. That is, WLB is an awareness in peoples’ minds as an individual issue rather than as an issue being discussed in Chinese society (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Indeed, WLB issues have not been publicised and institutionalised to generate a consensus among Chinese employees. It is also noted that the actual awareness and familiarity may be lower than found in this research because the research topic reminds participants of the topic so that they tend to show more recognition about WLB. As a few participants commented “I had rarely considered WLB until I heard your research subject. I think it is essential to take WLB into account right now” (A5).

²⁸ Identifiers using a capital letter represent Managers, those in lower case represent Employees.

Figure 10 The frequency statistics of the awareness and familiarity of WLB (survey data)



6.1.1.2 WLB with work orientation

The qualitative data from 23 interviews provide a large amount of information to identify Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB. Overall the findings indicate that individuals hold various work-life values and tend to embrace an orientation to work. Seven interviewees directly express similar statements that different people will have different views towards WLB, and one of them proposes a philosophical approach to WLB:

Balance is a difficult term to define. If the balance means that a balance of time distribution, between the family and career development, seems like a trade-off, this balance cannot be achieved for most employees; If the balance means taking on the responsibilities that must be fulfilled in the role of both work and the family, the full responsibility may be too heavy to be balanced. Balance means knowing what is most important in your life and then making choices according to important priorities (B11).

This statement provides a relatively comprehensive view of WLB in terms of time, responsibility and priorities, concluding that an individual's WLB is determined by work-life priorities. This echoes the prevailing WLB meaning defined in the Anglo-American work-life balance research that when individuals perform multiple roles, they tend to

allocate the work and life resources to the role they concern and value for WLB (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007).

According to Greenhaus and Allen's (2010) three work-life priorities, interviewees' priorities can be grouped into career-focused, family-focused and career-and-family focused areas. The majority of participants expect a career-family balance but experience a work-orientated reality. This is similar to existing findings (Zhang and Foley, 2017) that Chinese employees aim to achieve a work-life balance rather than solely emphasising one domain and ignoring the other. Since happiness and success have become more elusive in China, so Chinese people are seeking a new harmony between work, family and other obligations. However, the balanced perspective seems only to be an expectation for Chinese employees; the fact is most of the participants are used to living a work-centred life. For example,

Almost every staff member gives priority to work... the skilled and technical employees, especially the young, value self-achievement at work.... if you work more, you get paid more, and a higher salary level is the basis for a better life. On top of that, doing more work brings more opportunities for promotion, which improves not only the sense of work accomplishment but also the psychological sense of WLB (A1).

Both of my parents have serious diseases and are in the hospital...I really would have liked to be with them... However, I have to work in such a peak work season... I am taking my annual leave during these two weeks for my family, but I am still here (at my workplace during the annual leave) to deal with work issues that have to be done by specific days (B6).

These statements underline how Chinese employees tend to make work their top priority. However, the underlying reasons for this can vary. Most employees are dedicated to working for a better life. In particular, the skilled, technical and young employees tend to

intrinsically appreciate work achievement, which further fuels their work priority (Coffey et al., 2009). However, some employees are helplessly driven to work due to work demands, even in a position of personal hardship. This is demonstrated in the latter quote from participant B6. Work intensification reinforces to employees that their main priority is work. Interestingly, similar to B6, participants usually state the coercive work domination with neutral rather than compliant modal expressions. The tolerance of work domination seems normality to be socially accepted. As a consequence, the balance between work-life weighs much heavier on work, as a participant A4 points out “work and life imbalance is a constant.” This quotation echoes Xiao and Cooke’s (2012) findings that Chinese employees take work-life conflict as a matter of fact. Overall, work domination can be variously attributed to the potentially satisfying nature of much work, and to personality, professional identity and wider societal contexts that equate self-worth with work domination, and financial and career achievements. All these factors might be interrelated, enabling employees to prioritise work customarily as their ‘personal choice’.

6.1.1.3 WLB with integrative domination

The concept of WLB is not a simple dichotomy that allocates a fixed portion or percentage to work and life (Bloom, 2016; Lewis et al., 2007). The relationships between work and life are complex and Anglo-American work-life/family literature mainly summarises them as work-life segmentation, spillover, conflict, integration and enrichment (as is reviewed in chapter 2). Based upon that, Table 11 below interprets and classifies the main work-life views from participants according to these typical relationships. This seeks to analyse and identify the work-life relationship that Chinese employees tend to perceive.

Table 11 The main WLB views interpreted, and typical examples (interview data)

WLB models	Work-life segmentation	Work-life spillover (Against segmentation)	Work-life integration (Against segmentation)	Work-life conflict	Work-life enrichment (Against conflict)
Main views	Four participants expect and attempt to separate their work and life by working time and personal capacities.	Three participants argue work-life separation does not exist. Working time boundary cannot block the emotions and pressure generated from work spilling over.	Eleven participants highlight currently work-life is indispensable, inseparable and complementary. Work is the foundation for essential life and life quality.	Four participants state work and life can compete against each other due to limited resources (time, energy).	Five participants highlight work and life can mutually enrich.
Example quotes	<p>“Personally, my self-adjustment ability is very strong, and I can separate work from life. I neither bring the mood from work to the family nor bring family affairs and emotions to work.” (A11)</p> <p>“The balance we expect is that I can work wholeheartedly without disruptions from family issuesno work disruption in my personal life after work.” (b2)</p>	<p>“Emotion and pressure from one’s environment can invisibly spillover to another.” (B5)</p> <p>“Working within 9-5 probably can stop the time boundary between work and life but cannot stop the work matters remaining in our mind and emotions... If I left a bit of work for tomorrow, it would work around my mind during the evening.” (b12)</p>	<p>“Do not entirely split the work and life; they are part of the self-achievement through different paths. Let’s embrace them; work is not ‘evil’; life is not the ‘victim’.” (b12)</p> <p>“Work and life are inseparable and complementary.” (a5/B5).</p> <p>“Work and life are not contradictory and can be integrated together. Although there will be conflicts, there will be a way to resolve them.” (A1)</p>	<p>“Most of the employees are still struggling in finding a balance between the work, especially on call, and personal life due to the time and energy’s finiteness.” (A1)</p> <p>“Life conflicts with work. For instance, personal sickness (B5); family care and illness” (A10)</p>	<p>“both work and life bring us a lot of positive things, including material support, friends, transferable skills, social resources, self-confidence.” (b12)</p> <p>“Work brings a better life.” (b8) “Family happiness may affect work or career (A3)”</p> <p>“Work provides income to guarantee life necessities and social resources (a5), and hard work brings a higher income for a better financial foundation to live a better life” (B4)</p>

In general, work and life are seen as part of a more integrated and enriched relationship. On the one hand, most of the employees define work-life as an integrated and synergetic relationship with different layers of life including work, family, personal physical and mental health viewed to be all part of an integrated whole. Only a few participants follow the segmentation view that work and life can be separated either by time or personal time management. The majority of participants tend to perceive work as a survival, beneficial and accomplishing path to life, even though some employees, especially those in managerial positions, tend to believe that conflict is involved. Work-life conflict is frequently identified by job demands associated with workload, hours worked and on-call. Issues like personal health and family care can also result in life-work conflict. The irreconcilable experiences have shaped the employees' perceptions and result in them believing that conflict is involved. By contrast, more participants identify with work-life enrichment, where work helps to gain more earnings, increased consumption opportunities, improved career prospects for better life quality and satisfaction.

The perceived work-life integration and enrichment align with existing Chinese findings from cross-cultural work-life balance research (e.g. Spector et al., 2007; Lu, et al., 2009), where the integration and enrichment are interpreted from cultural teachings: work-life in China is perceived to be more about harmony. As Chen (2001) states "Chinese people view their lives holistically, and they strive to meet the expectations and obligations of all their roles...The Chinese seek harmony and balance in all aspects of their lives". However, whether culture is the main explanation of this form of the Chinese work-life

relationship needs careful consideration and will be examined in more detail in the discussion of the findings in Chapter 8.

6.1.1.4 WLB with social-demographical dynamic

WLB is a difficult topic to conceptualise in China as a result of social-demographic dynamics. Work-life balance research has suggested that individuals' work and life can be dynamic along with their social-demographics such as age, gender, family status and household structure (Liu et al., 2008). These factors make an individual's WLB diversified and changing. Although the survey data has not provided the information to certify this argument, there are two main demographic factors, life course and gender, that affect people's WLB which can be extracted and analysed from the qualitative data.

(1) Life course

Similar to the Anglo-American findings (Grzywacz and Marks, 2000), people in different stages of the life course tend to have different work-life priorities which shape their understanding of WLB. The following examples show the work-life views varies according to life course:

A single person is more able to freely self-arrange the work and life time to achieve an expected balance (a9)

With increasing work experience and a change of life status (e.g. new family and members), the focus may shift from work to personal life (b2)

In this position (middle management), the company and staff need me. At my age, I also need to spend considerable energy and time to care for my family, especially for sick elderly relatives and manage my child's education (B6)

My position (middle manager) gives me some work autonomy, allowing me to make some flexible and reasonable arrangements...I am an adult's mother and don't need to spend time caring for a child (A10).

According to the frequently mentioned keywords (i.e. work position and family status), it is found that the shift of the life course is mainly driven by changing work and family responsibilities and commitments. The dynamic of both demands can impact the relationship between work and life. Generally, single young employees have rarely experienced work-life tensions as they do not have too many family caring responsibilities. As the life course goes on, career advancement and having children and/or sick relatives will increase both work and family responsibilities. When getting close to pre-retirement age, a stable work situation and adult children may decrease the work-life demands. As a result, employees' work-life perceptions are dynamic with the life course and tend to be shown as an inverted U shape, where the middle-aged employees may feel the severe work-life tension as they are experiencing high levels of demands in both fields.

The dynamic work-life structure may also engender generational differences in understanding WLB among the different employees (Yi et al., 2010; Wu and Uen, 2015). Older generations tend to understand WLB as static balance with the focus of work and

family stability under the influence of traditional collectivism. The younger generation, raised in the resource-abundant and flexible society, may be more willing to adapt to the new working/life style to facilitate balance. For instance,

In terms of age structure of the staff, [born] post 60s or 70s are more collectivistic and tend to obey their line managers and make sacrifices for job stability; the majority of the current SOEs workforce is [born] post 80s or 90s, they tend to have a strong personality, personal consciousness and a wide range of knowledge. They are vigorous and passionate about work, pay attention to the right to self-discourse, and do not simply aim for work and life stability but pursue a dynamic and varied WLB (b9).

(2) Gender

“Both gender differences and gender role issues are essential to consider fully understanding the work-family interface’ (Eby et al. 2005: 181). Gender as one of the significant factors of WLB cannot be underestimated in China. The data demonstrated a gender dimension concerning the work-life interface. WLB appears to be an issue where family responsibility is largely shouldered by the female. Despite women increasingly attaching great importance to work and careers and men showing more engagement in family matters, the roles in the household division of labour has not been (fundamentally) changed. While work nature requires all of the employees to be more and more work-oriented, the biological and social gender pressures seem not to allow females to feel free to do so. This is demonstrated in the following quote examples,

If a working father is being asked something about WLB, he might be surprised to say, ‘ah, I have not thought about this issue’ [this echoes few male responses

(A8)] ...by contrast, a working mother might pour out a lot of complaints and grievances, telling you how hard it is to balance both... (b12)

Gender is an essential factor when considering WLB. Working women find it more difficult to balance their work and life. For Chinese families, women contribute more than men. Personally, I would focus on caring and household responsibilities after work. The role of the household division has not been changed too much. Still, some Chinese families allow men to do nothing at home. Take a vivid example, it would be a compliment if a dad drops his kid to school and this dad would be labelled as 'good dad', but mothers do this every day as a 'normality' (B7).

With the influence of demographic factors, Chinese WLB may be perceived as a dynamic and gendered concept. These factors can link to different work and life demands and resources, and thus influence individuals' WLB perceptions (Alwin, 2012). Since work and life demands and resources generally come from the workplace and home domains beyond the employee *per se*, the data analysis turns to explore the meaning of WLB from a broader perspective. Considering work has been found to be dominant over the non-work domain in WLB in existing (e.g. Frone, 2003) and this research, the following section will discuss Chinese WLB constructed from the organisational level.

6.1.2 Organisational level: WLB ignorance and the dominaton of work demands

At the organisational level, full of demands and resources shaping and impacting employees' WLB perceptions. Despite WLB being regarded as a personal issue rather than an organisational responsibility in China (Russell and Ross, 2008), employees highlighted the necessity of WLB being considered at the organisational level, "it is not

possible to achieve the balance without organisational influence” (a4). Just as the main argument of WLB states, organisations and management should undertake the responsibility to consider employees’ work-life needs; the variety of work demands and resources may shape and influence individual’s responses towards WLB (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). Analysing qualitative interview data in a quantitative way, the work demands, and resources provided from the case organisations are summarised in Table 12 as followed:

**Table 12 The work factors that impact employees’ WLB perceptions
(interview data)**

Work demands		Work resources	
	Frequency		Frequency
Working time	10	Company’s development for job security	3
Workload	9	Company supports (e.g. career, workplace equality, and environment.)	8
Work intensity	5	Support from line managers and colleagues	6
Pressure from line managers and colleagues	6	Workplace Guanxi	3

On the one hand, work demands like extra work hours, work intensity, workload, work pressure and stress are frequently mentioned. These factors are largely identified as important demands that affect employees’ work-life experience, mainly in terms of time allocation and energy depletion (Dermontti et al., 2001; Lu and Cooper, 2015). On the other, there are some organisational resources that influence their perceptions of WLB. The “Company’s general profits status and development vision” represents financial and employment security and stability, for instance, “Our company develops very well overall and has a high level of social responsibility, so working in such a promising place brings

us confidence about our WLB” (b5). Company growth and stability generally relate to financial development, which could be the objective factors to impact employees’ job security, which provide a trade-off for employees. Moreover, echoing the mainstream WLB research in the Anglo-American context (e.g. De Cieri et al., 2005; Dikkers et al. 2007), support from the company, line managers and colleagues are mentioned as beneficial resources which affect staff’s WLB. In addition, Guanxi is distinctively flagged out as an interpersonal resource in people management (Cooke, 2009a).

At China's organisational level, the two aspects of organisational issues, work demands and resources, highlight the variety and complexity of constructing WLB perceptions for employees. The influence of work demands and resources on employees' WLB will be analysed in the next chapter (7) in line with the theoretical framework. As the concept of WLB is socially constructed, the interplay of work demands and resources is largely determined by the impact of the exogenous environment from the national (and regional) level, and in the next section, the macro issues that impact employees' WLB perceptions are analysed.

6.1.3 National and regional level: Economic, institutional and socio-cultural factors

As Özbilgin, et al. (2011:177) state that "social and historical context has more explanatory power in work-life dynamics than the micro-individual level of explanations", and the dynamic and complex Chinese context deeply influences employees’ WLB perceptions. The rapidly changing economy and labour market, the construction of a harmonious society, the improvement of people’s living standard may all drive employees’

work-life awareness and influence their perceptions of WLB. The findings indicated that the national context influences peoples' WLB perceptions through "macro-economy", "market competition", "harmonious political orientation", "work legislation", and "social-cultural pressure/support on work and family". This section will demonstrate how each of these factors contributes to shaping Chinese employees' WLB perceptions.

6.1.3.1 Economic (regional) development and pressure

Economic development changes the nature of work nature double-edged directions, which intricately affects employees' work-life experience. Chinese economic development generally has increased employees' financial income and offers a wide range of employment opportunities, which enable employees to perceive a more positive view between work and life that embraces work-life enrichment. For example,

We are eager to find a balance between work and life now. Thirty years ago, employment opportunities were limited, and we worked for earnings and material needs that supported our families and us...Currently, we have worldwide occupational choices in the rich, various and flexible employment environment, and individuals' demands are not only to work for a living but also to work happily (A1).

However, there is a negative consequence of WLB resulting from external economic development. As is demonstrated in the quote below, the expanding economy and business competition have led to work intensification (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017). With widespread and heightened work demands, employees' work-life needs are less considered than organizational survival and development. Employees may default

and accept the WLB's marginalisation and tolerate the high work demands to trade off job security (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

Economic development brings different forms of business competition and work demands so that we are fully occupied by work with little room for personal life (B1).

In addition to the overall national economy, employees' WLB perceptions may be linked to regional economic development in China. Views of WLB can be heterogeneous within the different regions of a country. China is a unitary sovereign state and populous country with a vast territory and variety, and with imbalanced regional development. Chinese people categorise the cities into the tier system according to economic development. The research fieldwork region is located in the inland province and second-tier city where the industrial and labour market competition and labour mobility are less significant than in the first-tier cities. This external environment tends to foster within the local employees a mindset of contentedness towards work and life. By contrast, employees who work in developed cities especially those located in the coastal province may feel more sensitive about WLB because of the fiercer business and workforce competition.

Due to the regional differences, the intensity of competition in the inland province is not particularly fierce... There is a regional difference in understanding WLB, between the first-tier cities²⁹ such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen where there is more emphasis on career development, and employees suffer stressful work pressure. By contrast, urban work rhythms of second/three-tier cities are slower, so

²⁹ Tier system is widely used to classify Chinese cities. The tiers are used by analysts to study consumer behaviour, income level, politics, and local trends to help tune strategies to local conditions. China has 613 cities which are usually divided into four tiers. Different organisations define a tier using a number of factors, but they always fall within the following three main categories, GPD, politics and population.

employees tend to feel satisfied with the working conditions, a just-so-so work with just-so-so salary is enough to feel balanced (B3).

6.1.3.2 Institutional facilitation and hindrance

The CPC and government are the primary roles that influence Chinese employees' work-life experience by using macro-control tools to construct legislative and institutional contexts. Labour regulations, social welfare system and governmental policies at all levels policies create a governance context to guide and control company behaviour in the case of the WLB in both a direct and indirect way. With the development of the legal system in China's legislative and government regulations are strong indicators of the government's intentions in relation to enabling the combination of work and family responsibilities or giving personal life some priority (Russell and Ross, 2008). As one of the participants mentioned:

There is an increasing amount of legislation in labour law, and government policy and leave entitlement, which helps to secure employees' well-being including WLB (A1)

Meanwhile, under the highlighted marketisation, the regulations on paper may be far from effective in terms of their enforcement in practice. This is criticised by the participants below who state that national legislation and policy have not been fully implemented with well-coordinated mechanisms and mandatory supervision, which leaves a possible loophole for opportunistic employers to practice unethical behaviour:

China has been developing rapidly, but we do not have a sound legislative society where the supporting resources and mechanisms can fully keep up with economic

development... We do have labour law, but there is no way to implement it thoroughly (A7)

Some business owners do not enforce the labour law to protect the employees' wellbeing. Employees cannot negotiate with the boss saying I am entitled to do this in accordance with labour law, because the boss does not like this kind of employee (B3).

The trade union can play a limited role for employees to negotiate their work-life rights. The unions in these two-case organisations are social and service-supported departments under the leadership of party and management. The following quotations reflect the unions' role and limitations in respect of employees' work and life. In response to China's political and socio-cultural calling to 'establish a harmonious employment relationship', the union acts as a facilitator of harmony and is expected to provide various supports for facilitating employees' work and life. However, the support occurs only with the permission and control of the management. Chinese trade unions exist to maintain and foster the harmonious employment relationship in name only and are less likely to be an effective channel for employees to secure and negotiate their work-life rights and benefits.

Our union is under the leadership of the communist party in our company...we support employees in any service way that represents the enterprise's humanised care such as welfare subsidies, union activity organisation, child school entry, family counselling. (A3)

The effectiveness of Chinese trade unions is very weak. Under the administration and responsible for employers, they cannot purely stand for the interests of employees as foreign unions do but act as a harmonious protector...and pay only lip service [to WLB] (B3).

6.1.3.3 Collective socio-cultural values influence

Collectivism is traditionally acknowledged to be one of the Chinese cultural mainstreams. Regarding the data analysis, employees' WLB can be influenced by collectivism. Examples of a cultural dimension influencing participants' WLB can be related to socio-cultural values such as "collective spirits", "responsibility and dedication", "patriarchalism" and "guanxi." To be more specific,

Chinese heritage involves the concept of collectivism. We highlight collective benefits go first, personal interests move back. Thus, work responsibility and dedication are dominant in the workplace (B5)

Chinese work value is still work-oriented as this is also a manifestation of family responsibility... for a better life (A8)

We focus on managing Guanxi in the Chinese workplace. Employees might not go home directly after leaving work, instead, they join a lot of dinner parties and networking to foster the work relationship for future career development (B3).

Chinese culture remains an important influence in the workplace and can shape employees' views of work-life integration and enrichment. Being influenced by the collectivism, the frequently-mentioned work dedication can be seen as both a work and family responsibility by Chinese employees. This assumes the benefits behind this dedication can positively spillover to the family in the form of financial rewards and social honour, trading-off a better life (Ling and Powell, 2001). Therefore, Chinese employees are more likely to commit a large amount of time and energy to manage their

work and interpersonal relationships for a better life. In doing so, they willingly endure hardship and accept work domination as a matter of fact.

To summarise section 6.1, the data analysis shows that WLB is socially constructed and recognises interdependencies across multiple levels of analysis, including individual, organisational and national levels. Work and life - especially when defined at the personal level with a focus on balance - is an emerging issue. However, WLB is perceived as a vague concept, and people are less sensitive to this concept. This can be attributed to the diversified and dynamic features of Chinese society. At the individual level, while employees differ according to their subjective work-life priorities and views, the common issue to emerge from the data is that Chinese employees are found to be work-oriented and consider work-life as being more integrated and enriched. Furthermore, the formation of work-life perceptions is shaped by distinctive and dynamic demographics and contextual influences reflecting the Chinese distinctive organisational, regional and national levels. This highlights the validity of using the overall-based approach to scope WLB; it also reminds researchers to cautiously apply Anglo-American work and life literature to understand the WLB concept in the Chinese context. Considering the work-life perceptions impact on employees' actual work-life experiences and work behaviour, in turn, it is now appropriate to examine and explore Chinese employees' work-life experience.

6.2 Chinese employees' work-life balance and its related factors

Having understood the concept of WLB perceived by Chinese employees, this section turns to identify their work-life experience through the triangulation of data. We will begin with a general picture of Chinese employees' work and life, and then identify links between employees' WLB and the main work demands and outcomes. The survey data are used to describe the picture, and the interview data are used to certify the quantitative findings and provide more details to interpret participants' work-life situation and address issues of causality.

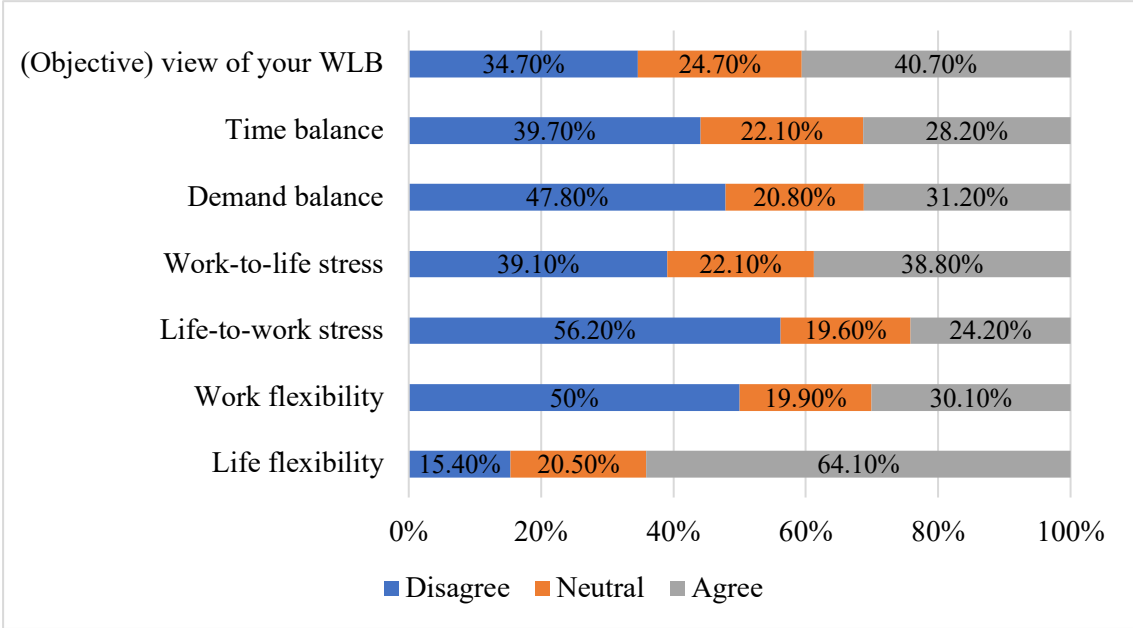
6.2.1 Chinese employees' overall work-life experience

Both the quantitative and qualitative data generally indicate that a relatively balanced work-life status is experienced by Chinese employees, although work appears to be the dominant element in employees' lives. According to the survey data, the respondents' perceived experience of WLB can be indicated from the frequency statistics of the WLB scale in Figure 11 below. The statistics reveal participant's WLB from the perspectives of general view, time, demands, stress and finally flexibility. Generally, around two-fifths of respondents (40.7%) report a balanced work-life status from a relatively objective point of view, compared to one third (34.7%) who claim they do not.

However, the other dimensions within the WLB scale appear to depict imbalance. Over one-third (34.7%) and nearly half (47.8%) of respondents perceived an imbalance in terms of time and work demands between work and life respectively. These imbalances may be caused by work domination. This can be revealed by the following statistics in

relation to work-to-life stress and flexibility: more respondents appear to experience work-to-life stress rather than life-to-work stress; employees seem far more capable of negotiating and managing their life rather than their work. These factors may challenge the overall positive WLB response. The interview data echoes this, showing Chinese employees perceived a slight positive (or ‘not too bad’) work-life experience overall, but that this is a relatively balanced work-life experience in terms of satisfaction rather than time. Nevertheless, few employees directly indicate a WLB is unattainable. More details will be provided in the following three sub-sections.

Figure 11 Chinese employees' perceived work-life balance experience (survey data)



6.2.1.1 Relative work-life balance

The majority of participants consider themselves to perceive WLB. The perspective can be extracted from the following views below:

Employees' WLB is not too bad. The intensity of competition in the inland province is not particularly fierce. Our company is a top-notch enterprise in the pharmaceutical and health industry with good development...our colleagues spontaneously organise some after-work activities ...work does not occupy my spare time too much, although a little, but not particularly too much (A1)

Generally, my current work and life is relatively balanced. In the SOEs, wages and benefits are both good; from my age point of view, my child grew up, and I do not need to take too much care; parents have their own pension and life (b9)

Relatively speaking, my work and life tends to balance...in the work domain, I am middle management with some work autonomy that allows me to make some flexible and reasonable arrangements for work; in my personal life, I am an adult's mother that doesn't need to spend too much time to take care of child (B11)

[My WLB is] not too bad...Despite my work being very challenging but under control...I am very happy because what I do is recognised by the company (a7).

These quotations reflect employees' "not too bad" work-life experiences and the rationales behind these experiences. First, external factors including the regional environment (inland province), ownership form (SOEs) and industry competition (a leading enterprise in the sector) lay beneficial foundations for employees' employment conditions. The external economic and business environments, the nature of employer and the organisational development provide them with a material foundation to secure pay and working conditions, and therefore facilitate the satisfaction of WLB (Lu and Cooper, 2015; Ollier-Malaterre, 2017; Foster and Ren, 2015); internally, the work autonomy (Allen, 2001), organisational recognition (Kossek et al., 2010) and a friendly

colleague community (Neirotti, 2018) can impact on employees' WLB. Regarding the personal domain, participants who undertake affordable and controllable family caring responsibilities are more able to achieve WLB (Lu and Cooper, 2015). As a result, while both sources of data showed employees might give greater priority to achieving an acceptable work-life balance at certain life stages, the snapshot reflected a conditional, relative and dynamic balance in the business context where work still dominates an employee's entire life.

6.2.1.2 Work-life balance in satisfaction but not in time and involvement

Participants' reported balance represents a psychological trade-off since, in fact, they suffer both a time- and involvement-imbalance in work and life. As is illustrated in the following examples, it is explained that material rewards, career development, and recognition may offset the imbalance in time and involvement and trade-off the balance in people's satisfaction, and the interviewees appear to appreciate the trade-off.

Work more, pay more, and the improvement of salary level is the foundation for better life and satisfaction in WLB (B1)

In terms of time and energy, there is no balance for employees...but the work recognition obtained from community, companies, colleagues and customers would enhance our sense of security and self-achievement, making them feel a psychological balance (B3)

Some traditional SOEs are recessive in the economic downturn [But we develop very well] ...we educate our employees to work hard and cherish their current work position and opportunities, this should create a good influence on an employee's

psychological balance...also, work dedication is a traditional cultural heritage in term of collectivism. (A1)

These quotes indicate that not only paid work helps to determine employees' work-life experience in the form of time and energy, but also the psychological space that people require to achieve a meaningful work-life balance. Thus, measuring WLB in China seems more of a subjective feeling and experience reflected upon an individual's personal work-life situation. At first, the assurance of economic incomes may be the premise to achieve their WLB as a basis of quality life, even for white-collar employees who also tend to have a higher income. Work domination may damage the WLB in terms of availability of time, but the potential higher pay derived from this working time commitment can help them achieve a work-life satisfaction. By contrast, working hour reduction is not a realistic coping mechanism to facilitate employees' WLB. Employees are fearful about job security and may feel pressure to perform in excess of explicit work demands. Particularly, where collectivism remains influential, hardship, self-sacrifice, and work dedication can be perceived in Chinese employees' work values (Lu et al., 2015b). The nature of the cultural tradition implies time exploitation but facilitates a psychological balance for employees. Generally, work-based achievement can be a major source of financial, self-esteem and cultural identity for employees. It may work as a moderator to enhance employees' overall satisfaction of work and life from work domination and intensification.

6.2.1.3 Low level of Work-life balance

Few participants report they are less likely to have a WLB experience resulting from the tensions between work and family life demands. Imbalance generally resulted from the intrusion and domination of work. Business and institutional environments are unfriendly to employees' WLB because work largely intrudes and occupies employees' life. For example:

Life is often abandoned as there are a lot of people under heavy work pressure... we do expect WLB, but market competition always breaks the balance that forces us to work overtime; both legislative enforcement and employee awareness are very weak in protecting our working rights (b8)

It is noted that respondents who reported imbalance are female managers with family caring responsibilities. Respondents showed work and life interfere with each other, and there is an irreconcilable dilemma between work demands and pressures and fulfilling family caring responsibilities. The insolvable tension leads to some negative outcomes, including confusion, exhaustion and endurance. In practice, when facing the double demands of both work and family life, employees must sacrifice either family life or work rather than achieve balance. For example,

I feel pretty much confused with WLB as it is very hard to find a balance point, I feel exhausted on account of my demanding work responsibilities and pressure and child and elderly care (B6)

As a female leader, WLB is very difficult...career and family conflict in nature... To lay my work foundation, I postponed my marriage and childbirth. Currently, despite my wish to continuously develop my career, I had to transfer my focus on

my child's care and education... I might be back to focus on my career when my child grows up (A11).

As is noted in the existing work-life findings (Xiao and Cooke, 2012; Woodhams et al., 2015), balancing work and life may be even more difficult for Chinese female managers because they are often squeezed between demanding work and family caring responsibilities. In China's labour market, where full-time employment is a norm, inadequate work flexibility in combination with high time and financial costs for childcare enable personal and family resources to become the only approach to the work-life tension (Hobson, 2011). Although higher financial incomes enable employees to be able to afford the paid childcare (Xiao and Cooke, 2012), they are not willing to be absent from their children's growth and development. Given that, the shift of work-life priority for female managers with dependent care is significant. They tend to actively relieve the extreme stress squeezing between family care and work demands by choosing to shelve their personal career development.

Overall, both sources of data show a relatively positive picture of WLB in China's pharmaceutical SOEs. This is not surprising, as Chinese employees tend to embrace a positive work-life perspective (i.e. enrichment). Most of the employees perceived a work-life balance at a psychological level even though their life is immensely occupied by work. However, material and career development gained from work may offset the time and involvement imbalance, enabling employees to reach a satisfactory balance. In addition, the topic of WLB remains somehow gendered in the Chinese context as females,

especially female managers, tend to show a lower level of WLB. The findings mainly contribute to the understanding Chinese employees' WLB, with a positive surface and hidden problems underneath. These problems may result from the demanding work that participants frequently mentioned. Hence, how are work demands related to Chinese employees' WLB? The next section examines these relationships with the aim of addressing the second research question.

6.2.2 Main work demands of Chinese employees' WLB

Most academic literature suggests that the dominating factors affecting employees' WLB arise from work, not personal life. The effect of work demands measured by working hours and workload on work-life interference has been identified in Chinese society (Lu et al., 2015b). As is argued in the theoretical framework, working hours and workload are considered as the two main work demands (Richman et al., 2008), and excessive demands can contribute to an imbalance between work and life (Demerouti et al., 2001). Underpinned by this, the following section will identify the working hours and workload of the research participants and examine the relationships with their WLB using both data sources. These findings will be demonstrated through the descriptive and correlation analysis of survey data and thematic analysis on the interview data.

6.2.2.1 Working hours and WLB

To understand the link between work demands and WLB, it is important to identify the employees' working patterns, that is, the contractual and actual hours that employees work. In addition to working hours work, employees' commuting hours should also be taken

into account when considering the length of the working day. In this sub-section, therefore, the relationship between working hours and WLB will be assessed.

(1) Working hours

The following analysis, using the survey data, examines participants' contractual and actual working hours and the variations in these over the past year, as well as potential reasons for the excessive workload. The thematic analysis of the interview data reflects a similar situation and helps to explain the causes behind Chinese employees' working patterns. In general, the quantitative and qualitative data related to working patterns depict full-time employment and participants experiencing a long, increasing and unplanned working hours.

a. Long and increasing working hours

Table 13 below shows the descriptive statistics that reflect the situation of participants' working hours. The mean of contractual working hours is 43.66 hours, which indicates two issues- full-time employment is a norm and the contractual working hours average just below the legal limit (44 hours) stipulated in Chinese labour law. What is worse, the mean of actual working hours (52.54) and the working day (5.62) are far over the legal limit. The full-time pattern of 'working an eight-hour per day' and '5 working days' (issued in the Chinese Labour Law and public advocacy) are not the case in these two case organisations. This is the same as Cooke's (2013) finding that so-called standard working hours (e.g. 40 hours per week) do not exist in the Chinese workplace. Chinese employees experience very long working hours that can occupy both their evening and

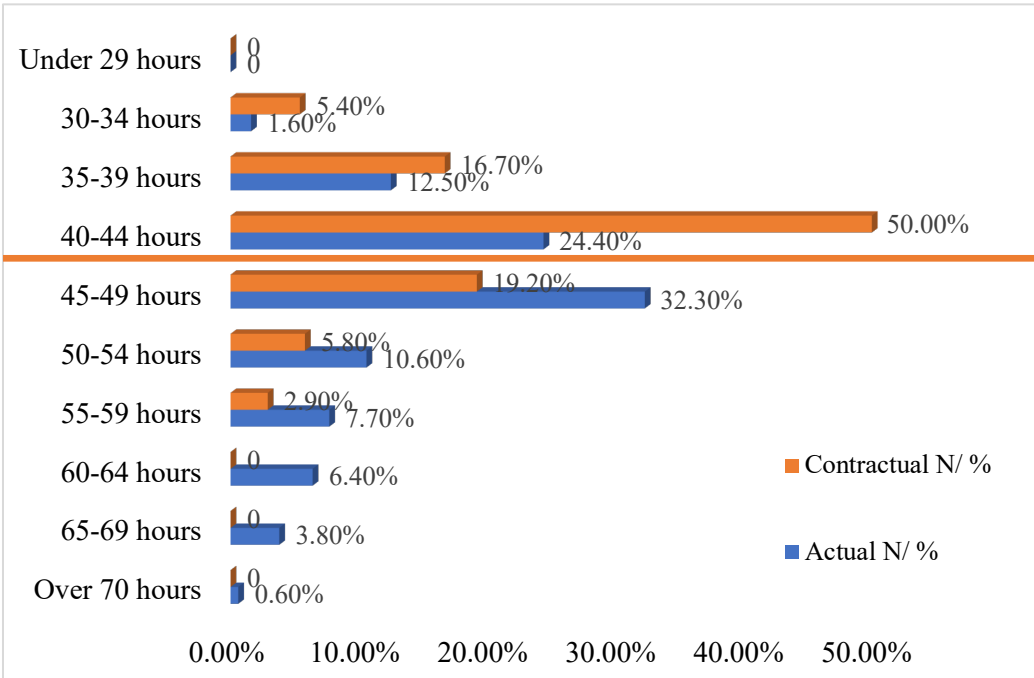
weekend time. And it is possible, that actual working hours may be even longer than those in the reported statistics (Xiao and Cooke, 2012).

Table 13 Working hours and days (survey data)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Contractual working hours	312	35	53	43.66	8.20
Actual working hours	312	38	72	52.54	13.35
Actual working days	312	5	7	5.62	2.89

As Fagan et al. (2003) stated, working time encompasses more than the legal contractual work limits (set either by governments or collective agreements), the statistics show the actual hours participants work is far longer than the hours contracted as is evidently shown in the comparison Figure 12 below.

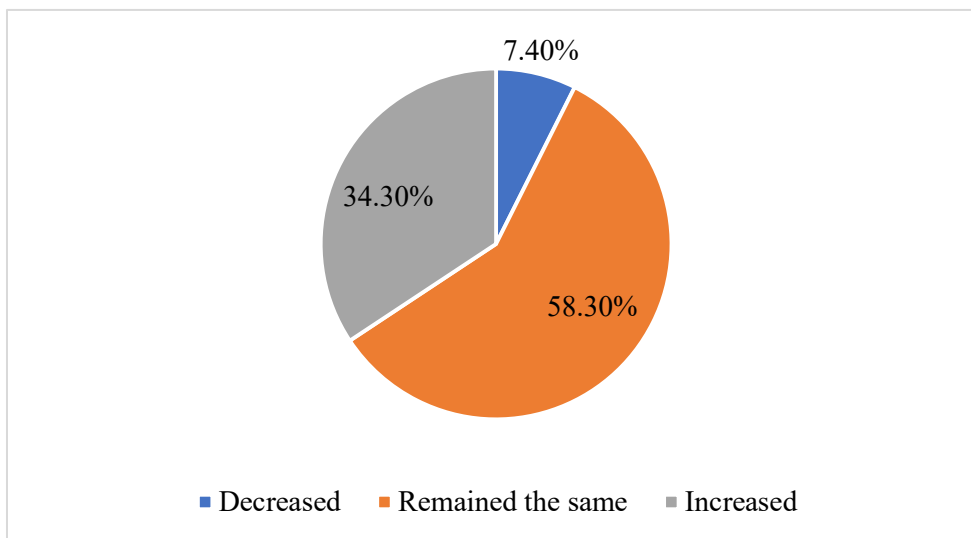
Figure 12 Comparing contractual and actual working hours (survey data)



Using 44 hours as a benchmark, over two thirds (72.1%) of Chinese employees were contracted to work under 44 hours per week. A significant group of participants (27.9%) claimed their contractual hours exceed the lawful weekly limits. By contrast, almost every participant works over their contracted hours. Nearly two-thirds (61.5%) of all respondents' work, on average, over the legal limit, even though less than one-third (27.9%) are contracted to do so. More worryingly, around one-third (29.1%) of participants work, on average, over 50 hours per week; a minority of them (10.8%) work over 60 hours; and there are 2 participants (0.6%) who work over 70 hours, which far exceeds the maximum working hours stipulated under the Chinese Labour Law. These findings largely correspond with the existing literature that indicates that long working hours is a common phenomenon amongst all levels of Chinese workers and managers (Cooke, 2013; Lu, 2016).

In terms of working hours' variation shown in Figure 13 below, around one-third (34.3%) stated their working hours had increased over the past year. A minority of participants (7.4%) reported that working hours had decreased, but over half (58.3%) of them reported the same level of working hours. Generally, participants' working hours appear to be either steady or increasing.

Figure 13 Working hours variation over the past year (survey data)



b. Spontaneous and ‘voluntary’ overworking

The interview data largely echoes the quantitative findings that indicate long working hours as the norm in the Chinese workplace and highlight that long hours are perceived as spontaneous and ‘voluntary’ behaviour. Plenty of interview quotes imply that such behaviours result from unwritten understandings and norms (custom and practice), but have been substantively developed in the workplace as is argued by Brown (1972). For example, “Overtime is a common phenomenon. ‘Nine to five’ does not exist; we work spontaneously and voluntarily” (b8).

Exploring the reasons for overworking may help us to examine its spontaneous and voluntary characteristics. Descriptive statistics from the survey findings shown in Table 14 below, present the general reasons for the long working norm.

Table 14 The main reasons for additional hours (ranked, survey data)

Overwork causes	N	%
To keep up with my workload	184	58.6%
I choose to work extra hours	156	50%
I like the sense of achievement I get at work	77	24.7%
I enjoy my work	72	23.1%
To gain promotion	66	21.2%
The hours I work are planned	59	18.9%
Pressure from line managers	59	18.9%
I am afraid of losing my job	32	10.3%
Other reasons	18	5.8%
I am afraid of my salary being cut	13	4.2%
For overtime payments	13	4.2%
Pressure from colleagues	9	2.9%
Other reasons: Company A: Do not want to drag the work progress down To promote organisational/team performance Emergency to be sorted out Company B: Learn more at work Improve personal, professional capacity Expect to improve personal work quality Every member of staff overworks Pressure from the project schedule/customer demands		
Total responses	312	

Almost three-fifths of participants (58.6%) chose to work longer hours to keep pace with their workload or because it is an expected part of the job. This is similar to Anglo-American WLB research findings related to additional working hours (e.g. French, 2014), as workload is seen as the primary antecedent of working hours. Nevertheless, half of the participants reported they chose to work additional hours themselves. More positively, the following three factors, chosen by more than 20% of participants, indicate their personal willingness to work additional hours: due to the sense of achievement; enjoyment of work; and career development. Pressure from managers appears to be an important factor leading participant to work extra hours, then came lost financial earnings,

job insecurity and pressures from colleagues as less important reasons. Additionally, a few employees added their own reasons for additional hours, involving the extrinsic and intrinsic sides, business pressure and work motivation. In conclusion, participants' spontaneous and 'voluntary' overworking behaviour can be attributed to two types of behaviour, motivation-driven and pressure-driven, as Guest (2002) suggests, the situation of working hours can be driven by subjective belief and forced by an external requirement.

The interview data may help to enrich the argument. The majority of participants expressed their overworking behaviour is attributed to the trade-off between personal career development and the manifestation of the collectivist spirit. Employees value the self-achievement at work rather than WLB, so they are less likely to resent overworking.

For example,

We value the sense of work achievement. If our work is recognised and self-personal value stands out, we don't care about working overtime, less income and WLB (B4)

Moreover, as Skinner and Pocock (2008) argue the long working hours picture is painted by cultural meanings of the workplace. The collectivist spirit highlighted in the Chinese workplace may facilitate the long working culture, where "hardworking" as a virtue and ethos should infiltrate employees' mindset and behaviour (Lu, 2016). Furthermore, the idea of hard-working commitment by putting in long hours can be regarded as the 'good model' and manifestation of corporate cohesion promoted by the management. As Lewis and Cooper (2005: 349) stated "long working hours become professional identity affirming". Managerial and peer pressures reinforce spontaneous and voluntary

overworking and further explains the personal sacrifice of WLB. Under these cultural influences, not only is the long working norm acceptable for the employee but understandable for their families. For example,

My staff and I do additional hours due to my sense of work responsibility and dedication ... collective spirit is higher than personal interest... my family also take an empathetic attitude towards it (A10)

We are white-collar, we do not advocate overtime, and there is no-one forcing you to do the additional hours...(however) all leaders like hard-working and competent employees and our leaders educated us by taking colleagues who are successful through working hard as an example (a2).

The other part of participants takes a helpless attitude towards overworking, reporting working longer as inevitable due to business pressure and institutional constraints. They are always forced to be trapped in long working hours culture to meet the needs of the business. For example,

The various and changing business environments, and competitive market force enterprises mean employees continue to work longer and harder, in exchange for survival and development (B1)

We cannot avoid the overtime working... employees do sacrifice their life for business. (A8).

These typical quotes from the interviews indicate that Chinese employees work long and hard as they are afraid of being marginalised under conditions of fierce market competition. Business pressure is naturally internalised and socialised into employees'

work. They get used to shouldering the pressure and transform it into work intensity, and thus working hard becomes a common coping strategy, and the picture of spontaneous and voluntary overworking becomes rooted in the Chinese workplace. Work intensification forces these employees commit to additional hours and efforts outside of the standard hours, which actually turn out to be detrimental to their personal life (Hyman et al., 2005; Cooke, 2013). As some commenters contend that under business pressure and competitive context, the trade-off of employees' commitment-performance may be the result of the exploitation of employees, not the result of them willingly exerting discretionary effort (Keenoy, 1999; Pass, 2017).

The weaknesses of working time regulation increase the scope for work intensification in the Chinese workplace. SOEs can be seen as good employers that strictly follow with labour legislation and policy in principle. As a result, excessive hours shall not be flagged up in the workplace as participants asserted. However, under market competition and business pressure, when labour cost-effectiveness remains the key to business profitability, the employees' work-life rights and needs are a secondary consideration. As the Chinese proverb says, "Where there is a policy, there is a countermeasure." Employers may have countermeasures to transform legally supported employee-friendly policies for employer-friendly objectives. Such countermeasures such as the performance-related pay and the promotion system as well as collective philosophical teachings are, therefore, artfully deployed in the workplace. Additionally, Chinese employees are less able to bargain but remain silent and tolerant when the workload is assigned under unitary

management. Consequently, since the institutional environment may fail to prevent the ‘voluntary’ working, the “voluntary” as the rhetoric of “excessive” working style occurs as a norm in the Chinese workplace.

Although SOEs are known as both a legislative enforcer and political follower, legislative enforcement is very weak for protecting employees’ working rights (b8) It is impossible to bargain over workload with managers...taking a half-hearted attitude or behaviour towards excessive working is more likely to constrain our personal development (b10).

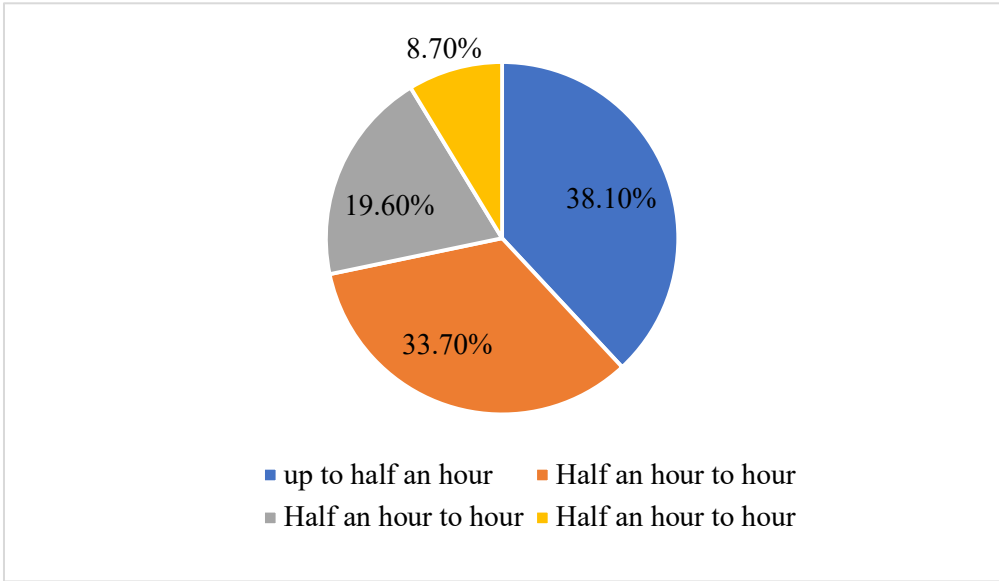
To summarise, under the influence of intensive market competition, cultural teaching and weak legal regulation, employees’ commitment to working is gauged by the number of hours worked. Securing meaningful WLB may be neither available nor applicable in terms of the (working) time dimension.

c. Underestimated commuting time

Time spent commuting, which represents an additional time-based work demand on top of working hours (and can be stressful in itself), can crowd out employees’ non-work time and cause work-life tension. As is outlined in Figure 14 below, only 38.1% of survey participants spend up to half an hour travelling to work; the majority of participants (61.9%) reported over half an hour commuting time: of this one-third (33.7%) between half an hour and one hour commuting time; around one fifth (19.6%) between one and two hours and almost one-tenth (8.7%) over two hours. Furthermore, as interview participant A2 reports “at least 3 hours commuting time per day”; while A10 notes that “when we leave work and head back home, and finish dinner, it is time to go to bed.”

Whilst the length of the commute is not necessarily counted in people’s work, what is underestimated is how commuting hours also squeeze employees’ personal life on top of long working hours.

Figure 14 The frequency statistics of the length of daily commuting hours (survey data)



Working time is no longer a new, but it is still significant a topic in employment relations in both the national and occupational context. For Chinese white-collar employees in the two pharmaceutical SOEs, while working extra hours is not advocated in principle, it has not been eliminated. The participants reported ‘voluntarily’ and ‘spontaneously’ working additional hours as a result of both motivation and pressure. The subjective work orientation and objective work intensification constantly reinforce the overworking situation. Whilst there is a thin line between “voluntary work” and “forced work”, they both result in long and even an increasing number of working hours. Given that, it is intriguing to explore the extent to which a high level of work involvement and working time impinge on employees’ work and life. To what extent can material and psychological

work rewards offset work domination and contribute to work-life satisfaction? The answer to this requires a focus on the relationship between working hours and WLB.

(2) The relationship between Working hours and WLB

The time-based conflict is regarded as the most significant contribution to a work-life imbalance (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985), especially for the ‘time squeezed’ white-collar employees. Based upon the JD-R model, lengthening work hours may drain employees' energy and therefore create a work-life imbalance. However, the link between working hours and employees' WLB emerging from the research findings seems rather more complex than this theoretical explanation. While the survey data reports a significant negative correlation between the two variables, the interviewees, perceive themselves to have a relatively acceptable WLB while suffering the long working hours. The details are demonstrated in the following two subsections.

a. Working hours are significantly negatively correlated to WLB

The correlation statistics presented in Table 15 indicate that both contracted and (especially) actual working hours are significantly negatively correlated to WLB. The more hours participants work the less WLB they can achieve. It is also a finding from the qualitative interview data. No matter whether employees are forced to, or voluntarily, work overtime, the additional hours spent at work reduce peoples' ability to meet multiple role demands, leading to a diminished sense of successfully integrating work and life. These findings support the theoretical explanation of JD-R model and the dominated

empirical findings both in the Anglo-American and Chinese context (e.g. Frone et al., 1992a; Cooper and Lu, 2015).

**Table 15 Correlation statistics for working hours and work-life balance
(survey data)**

		Contracted hours	Actual hours	Commuting hours
Work-life balance	Coefficient	-.171**	-.239**	-.051
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.253
	N	312	312	312
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)				

Long working hours certainly affect their WLB...No matter why employees do additional work, either passively forced by workload or performance indicators or actively work for money and [their] career, employees' personal life will be compressed (B1).

In particular, the qualitative data highlight that unpredictable work demands significantly pressurise employees' WLB. As is reflected in the following quotes, 'on-call' work can collide with employees' anticipated work-life plans. Employees can find that they cannot be relaxed after work, and when employees are always focussed or thinking about work then this constantly drains their energy levels. To date, advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) make work flexibility, both in terms of place and time, become available and feasible, but this flexibility is often used in an employer-friendly way. It is also the case in the Chinese workplace that employees are expected to work and attend meetings in non-working hours, and they are required to be always online and ready for temporary work tasks assigned by their line manager (Xiao and Cooke,

2012). Under the leadership of unitary managers, employees have little bargaining power but work overtime on site or ‘take-work-home’.

I heard a staff member of mine say: ‘even at 11 pm I do not dare to change into my slippers’... I began to realise the impact of being on-call on employees’ WLB (A10)
We are required to work 24 hours on-call, because temporary tasks that arise, require us to work overtime, which affects the employees’ WLB (B5).

In terms of commuting hours, there is not a significant correlation between commuting time and WLB. However, some of the interview data indicate the negative link. As A8 states “commuting hours are unproductive for both work and life because it has a negative consequence on employees’ quality of life.” Employees who are frequently on business trips experience much more work-life tension. As interviewee a8 noted “we drive more than 30,000 km per year for business travel needs, the degree of fatigue and psychological stress impinge on our WLB.” As a result, it may be reasonable to argue that commuting time does influence WLB, although the impact of commuting time on WLB is not perceived does not appear to be as a significant for Chinese employees compared to those the Anglo-American studies (Beswick, 2003; French, 2014).

b. Working longer with a work-life balance?

It is cautiously noted in Table 15 (above) that the negative relationship between actual working hours and WLB is not strong. The correlation coefficient ($r = -.213^{**30}$, $p < .01$) indicates a low level of negative correlation. The weak relationship appears to be

30 The correlation coefficient indicates the strength of relationship between variables. The closer the coefficient is to absolute 1, the stronger the relationship; the closer it is to 0, the weaker the relationship. When the correlation coefficient falls in the absolute interval (0.1, 0.3), it refers to a weak relationship (Cohen, 1988).

explained by the interview participants' perceived work-life experience. As interviewee

A1 notes:

Although overworking spills over negatively into our personal life, overall, balancing work and life is not a big problem for us...we should work effectively and prioritise personal schedules.

In some cases, long working hours may not necessarily impact on an individual's WLB, where 'trade-offs' play a key role in blocking the negative relationship between working hours and WLB. Similar to reasons provided in relation to work-life satisfaction, 'material and career rewards' (b3), and 'cultural teaching in the collectivist workplace' (A1/a2) may buffer the direct time-based tensions on the overall work-life experience. Individually, additional hours may be regarded as evidence of seeking career development, which may offset the time imbalance and lead to a psychological balance. Collectively, the companies orally promote employees' WLB by using the leverage of job insecurity and hardworking ethos rather than the substantial legal protection and policy support. It is likely that all these interrelated factors contribute, to some extent, to employees believing they just need to work effectively or develop better time management skills, rather than questioning long working norms and unrealistic workloads.

Overall, the findings reflect the significant negative relationship between working hours and WLB, in line with the extant literature, but the low negative level leads us to reach seemingly contradictory conclusions. Chinese employees experience long working hours but perceive there to be relatively positive work-life experiences. This results from a

variety of 'trade-offs' for employees arising from long working hours. These empirical findings, on the one hand, confirm the complexity of WLB issues: namely, that individuals' work-life experiences are dynamically shaped by multi-level factors. On the other hand, they also challenge the classical argument of 'time-based conflict' and the deletion process of 'job demands and WLB' derived from the JD-R model. More detailed discussion related to these contradictory findings will be presented in chapter 8. As the main reason for longer working hours is the perceived need to 'keep up with the workload', the next section examines workload issues and the associated link to employees' WLB.

6.2.2.2 Workload and WLB

This section examines workload as another main work demand and its relationship to WLB through mixed findings from the survey and interviews. Firstly, participants' workload is assessed: in terms of the extent to which workload has increased the main reasons for the increased workload. Secondly, the relationship between employees' workload and WLB is examined by establishing the extent which works spills over into the lives of employees.

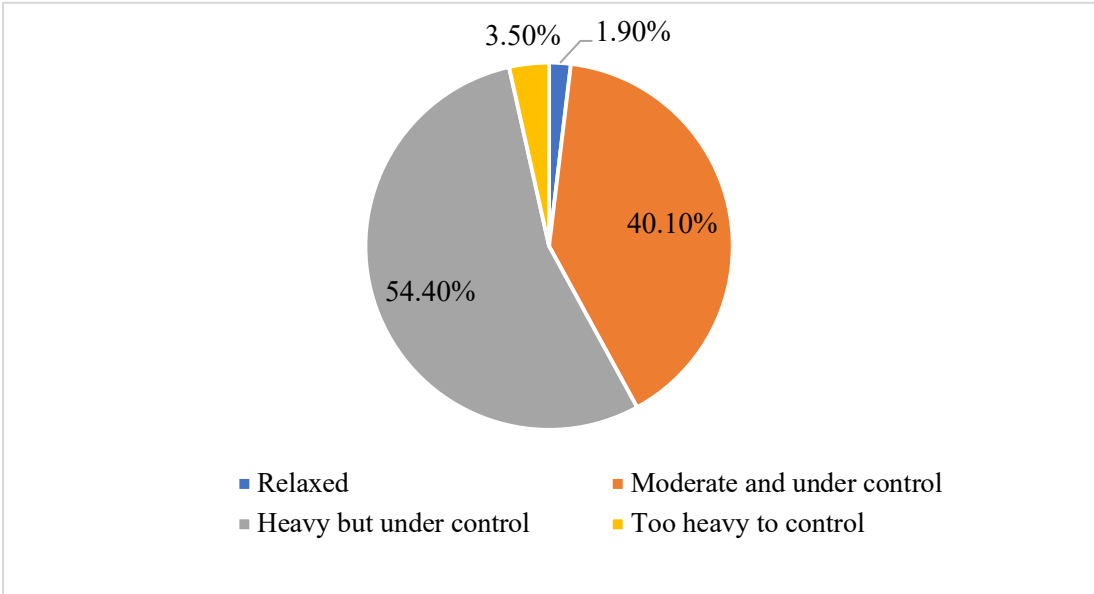
(1) Workload conditions

a. Heavy but under control workload

Participants' perceived workload status is presented through capturing perceptions as to whether the workload is beyond a level that an employee can accomplish during contracted hours. The result shows in Figure 15 that over half of participants (54.4%) report their workload is 'heavy but under control', and while 3.5% of participants still

think their workload is ‘too heavy to control’. Two-fifths of participants (40.1%) state workload is ‘moderate and under control’, while only six of them (1.9%) regarded their workload as ‘relaxed’.

Figure 15 The frequency statistics of workload conditions (survey data)



The interview data also delivered a similar picture in that “the workload is relatively heavy but within a controllable range” (a2). Furthermore, some employees emphasised that “if the workload is acceptable and rewarded, even though it is heavy, we are willing to handle it” (b9). Employees’ perception of workload may be moderated by the quantity of work and amount of pay. If both of these two factors are met in terms of the employee’s expectations, the employee tends not to report that their workload is excessive. It is noted that the workload situation may be more negative than the participants report. The reason can be deduced from a managerial participant’s statement as is demonstrated below.

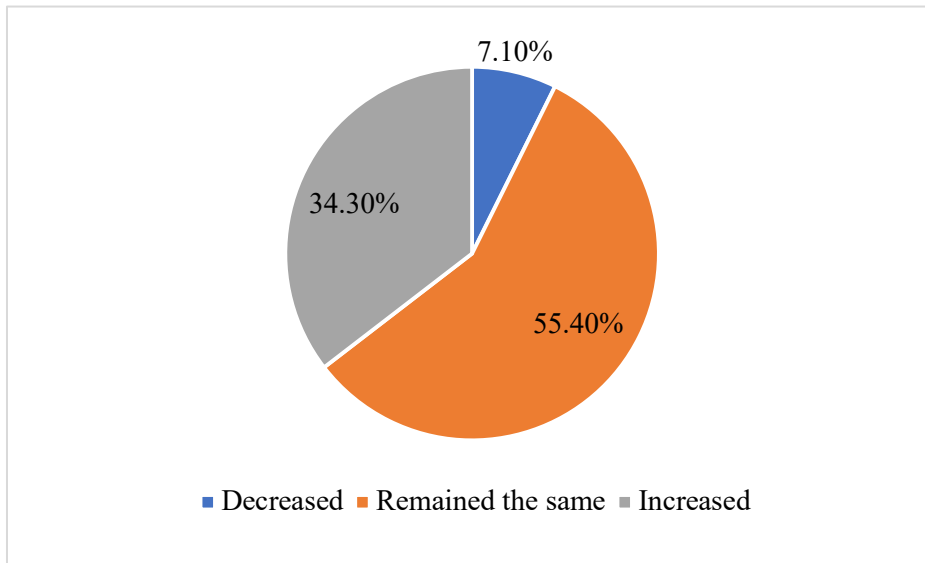
The extra workload aims to offer my staff the opportunity to learn and develop a skill...If the workload is too heavy to bear, we should do self-reflection: whether our work efficiency is low; whether we lack work skills (A10).

In China, an employee's workload control may be associated with their work competency including their efficiency and skills. When being asked about the workload status, employees are less likely to acknowledge excessive workload as it may imply that they lack skills in managing and finishing their work. Instead of questioning and seeking to negotiate over workload with the line manager, employees tend to tolerate the workload and conduct self-reflection. It is also found in Anglo-American research, employees adapt to ever-increasing workload by working harder and smarter, often constructing this as an active choice (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). This might be what 'the best worker' looks like under unitary management. However, when managing workload is merely seen to be an employee's issue, the manager's responsibility is neglected. The manager should have assigned and controlled employees' workload in a reasonable range. Therefore, the reported "heavy but under control" workload might be a distinctively optimistic picture within the Chinese workplace. After all, as the survey data highlighted long hours are worked mainly 'to keep up their workload', participants need to work (52.54 hours on average) far over the legal limit (44 hours) per work.

b. Stable or increasing workload

In terms of changes to workload, the data show a stable or increasing trend. As is shown in Figure 16 below, the majority, over half of participants (55.4%) state their workload remained the same compared to the past year. Yet over one-third of participants (37.5%) think that their workload has increased and only 7.1% of members have seen a decrease in their workload.

Figure 16 Workload variation over the past year (survey data)



The 117 participants who reported an increased workload were asked to provide a reason for this, which is presented in Table 16 below. Nearly half (45.3%) the participants point out that their workload has increased due to pursuing personal goals of career development. The interview data, however, indicate the increased workload may not be fully self-imposed but fundamentally driven by the control of unitary management, with a4 indicating that “workload has a certain growth rate per year; this ‘top up’ aims to motivate employees to achieve better goals.” Indeed, more than half of them (54.7%) think the increased workload resulted from work changes and pressures. To be more specific: job vacancies (30.8%); the introduction of new working practices (26.5%), pressure from line managers (20.5%) and reduced staffing levels (16.2%) are identified as important reasons for increases in workload. In addition, in order to broadly understand the reasons, participants were invited to identify their own reasons for the increased workload. The main reason summarised from respondents' open answers is that workload is increased by the intensity of business demands. As one of the interviewees mentioned,

“Our workload is directly and significantly impacted by the business demands. Wherever needed, we have to go for it. (B6)” In summary, similar to the reasons for overworking, there are two groups of factors that drive increased workload for employees; one primary is external business pressure, the other is personal development motivation.

Table 16 The main reasons for increased workload (ranked, survey data)

The main reasons	N	%
My personal career development goals have progressed	53	45.3%
Job vacancies (I am responsible for extra work due to the unfilled job positions)	36	30.8%
Introduction of new working practices (e.g. performance appraisal)	31	26.5%
Pressure from line managers	24	20.5%
Reduced staffing levels (Overall)	20	17.1%
Other reasons	19	16.2%
Introduction of new work systems (e.g. IT)	12	10.9%
Other: Company A: Release/Increase the new products /projects /businesses The new position of responsibility/increase job content Increase work stress; Company B: Work position changed; Work content is refined in detail so that increases the workload; Pressure from the project schedule		
Total responses	117	100%

(2) The relationship of Workload and Work-life balance

Correlation Table 17 below shows participants’ workload is significantly negatively correlated with WLB; the more workload participants undertake, the less WLB they will achieve. The finding echoes the existing research both in the Anglo-American and

Chinese context (Frone, et al., 1997b; Chen, et al., 2017). The negative relationship can be explained by the JD-R model that the excessive workload may deplete employees' resources and cause emotional and physical exhaustion at work, which negatively spills over to their personal life and impacts on WLB. It is noted that, similar to the 'working time-WLB' relationship, the low level of the coefficient ($r = -.275^{**}$, $p < .01$) statistically reflects a relatively weaker negative relationship between the two variables.

Table 17 Correlation statistics for workload and work-life balance (survey data)

		Workload
Work-life balance	Coefficient	-.275**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	312
** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

The interview data help explain the low negative level of correlation between workload and WLB. While the negative level may be moderated by the variety of expected returns from the workload, the nature of the workload is deemed to impact employees' WLB detrimentally. Some participants state "the impact of workload on WLB is not straightforward (A10)", because the negative impact can be buffered by potential benefits such as: "learning and development opportunities at work (A10)", "develop[ing] personal potential (a4)", "leaders' recognition (A7) and trust (B11)". Career-orientation and recognition may inherently motivate those employees who treat excessive workload as offering opportunities to learn and achieve their career prospects (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014), leading to a psychological balance between work and life. Therefore, employees' WLB is not necessarily distorted by, or is less subject to, increased workload.

However, does the extra workload really derive from self-motivation? The following quote criticises this idea.

Most of the workload cannot be quantified; instead of the workload, we suffer from a lot of work stress. Once the workload is appointed, the first reflection is 'rejection' in mind, but the fact is we cannot bargain, let alone reject [it]. What we only can do is transfer the pressure into motivation, accept it and be patient in dealing with it...we are not living up to the leader's trust. But it does not change the fact that workload increases pressure, which can influence employees' WLB (B11).

No one is willing and ready to accept an excessive workload. Workload related stress may significantly affect employees' attitudes and behaviours. In particular, the chosen participants are the white-collar employees who are more likely to undertake the complex and challenging workload under the pressure of performance indicators. The stressful workload is more likely to cause the strain spilling over from work to life (Hyman et al. 2003). Moreover, in the unitary Chinese workplace, employees are less likely to negotiate the workload with their manager. Helplessness becomes the only solution to alleviate the work-life tension caused by the negative work spillover ("transfer the pressure into motivation") due to a feeling of "not living up to the leader's trust". However, leaders' recognition and trust may not be enough to compensate for the negative relationship between workload and WLB.

Overall, this section depicted the main work demands, working hours and workload that Chinese employees have and examined their complex negative relationships with WLB through both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The findings unveil a

“spontaneous and voluntary” long working hours culture and workload that is ‘heavy but under control’. These heavy work demands do appear to impact employees' WLB, but this is not resented by the participants. This may be because the resultant material and career rewards and/or the business and managerial pressure may impact on the relationship between work demands and participants' WLB. It contributes to certifying the depletion process of the JD-R model, namely that work demands may damage an individual's WLB but more than that, it is noted there are some other factors at individual, organisational and national level that can moderate the depletion process.

6.2.3 Chinese employees' WLB and their job performance

Employees' work-life experiences can have an effect on their work behaviour including the most attentional work-related outcome, better job performance (Carlson et al. 2011; Frone et al. 1997a; Whiston and Cinamon 2015). However, it is problematic to conclude that there is a positive link between WLB and their job performance. The following subsection will look at the relationship between the two variables using correlation statistics and interview analysis.

The statistical correlation in Table 18 below indicates a non-significant relationship between WLB and job performance.

**Table 18 Correlation statistics for work-life balance and job performance
(survey data)**

		Job performance
Work-life balance	Coefficient	.021
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.711
	N	312
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)		

Similarly, in the interviews most participants believe there is a beneficial mutuality between WLB and job performance in theory but tend to emphasise that job performance is little related to WLB in practice. Instead, material and career rewards are the key lever for job performance, as is indicated by B4's expression below.

Employees who have WLB tend to be happier and more satisfied with the work so that they may initiate their potentials and perform better at work...but it (WLB) does not play a decisive role. The tangible rewards like pay and promotion usually speak louder (B4).

Even if participants are working long hours (time-based conflict) and under stressful workload (strain-based conflict), their job performance is not necessarily reduced. When employees' performance determines their pay and promotion, in order to secure financial rewards and career prospects, they are less likely to be bothered by a low level of WLB. This finding corresponds to existing research that indicates no significant links between WLB and work-related outcomes (Zhang et al., 2012). However, the difference lies in the explanation of underlying reasons. The existing research illustrates the reason (ibid; Lu et al., 2015c) from both economic and cultural perspectives; whereas, the interview data only demonstrated the limited impact of work-life interference on job performance in the sense of financial and esteem needs. In terms of the Chinese organisational perspective, employees' WLB is not seen as a performance motivator for the purpose of the business case. On the one hand, the WLB programme and initiatives are under-developed within the HRM function; on the other, senior managers being interviewed did not reveal a practical attempt to incorporate WLB into the strategic organisational consideration. The

organisational resources and behaviour related to employees' WLB will be identified in the next chapter.

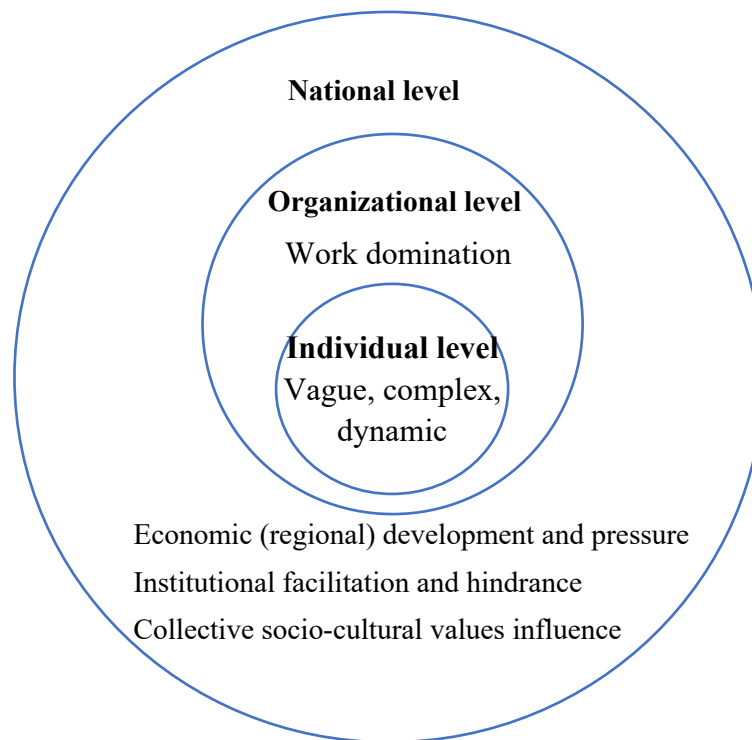
In summary, this section examined Chinese employees' perceived work-life experience and its related work antecedents and outcomes. Chinese employees largely reported a relatively satisfactory WLB. The material gains and career development gained from work may offset the time spent at work to establish a satisfactory balance. Beyond this positive picture, the section also identified hidden problems; namely that most employees are suffering from irreconcilable time constraints and strained work-life tensions. The tensions are largely a result of the "spontaneous and voluntary" long working hours and 'heavy but under control' workloads in the workplace in line with the depletion process identified in the JD-R model. In addition, no matter whether the work-life experience is perceived as good or bad, it appears to have no significant link with job performance. Employees' WLB seems yet to be a performance motivator.

6.3 Conclusion

Work-life imbalance has increased as a phenomenon in China with the rapid economic and social transition. Despite employees' increased awareness in recognising the importance of WLB, their understanding of WLB remains limited. This chapter analysed the quantitative and qualitative data generated by the research to examine the understanding of WLB in the Chinese context, in response to the first and second research questions and identified the part of the theoretical framework (path 1 and 4).

WLB is a complex and dynamic concept. Underpinned by the multi-layered conceptual framework of WLB, the understanding of WLB was holistically examined and the findings addressed the key elements in each layer as is shown in Figure 17 below. Given working hours and workload issues (along with commuting pressures) WLB is increasingly significant to the employees in this research. Despite this, it remains a generally vague and heterogeneous concept whose meaning can vary from individual to individual. However, the common features lie in the domination of work and work-life integration. Thus, individual perceptions of and choices related to WLB can be shaped by the multi-layered factors emanating from organisational and national (and regional) contexts. At the organisational level, work demands and resources, and especially demands, can have direct and significant impacts on employees' WLB. At the country and regional level, predominately, economic, institutional and social-cultural factors can both invisibly drive and impede employees attaining WLB. The multi-layered factors enable the work-life relationship to be viewed as integrated and not as separate entities. With work-life integration, Chinese employees tend to believe work enriches their life, indicating work can be beneficial and help accomplish material gains and status. This finding contributes to scoping the meaning of WLB in China and it is argued that the conceptual framework of WLB, focusing on an overall-based perspective, has been empirically validated. It also reminds work-life researchers to be cautious when applying Anglo-American work-life literature to understand and explain non-western contexts. The specific nature of Chinese work-life issues compared to the Anglo-American-dominated literature will be further discussed in Chapter 8.

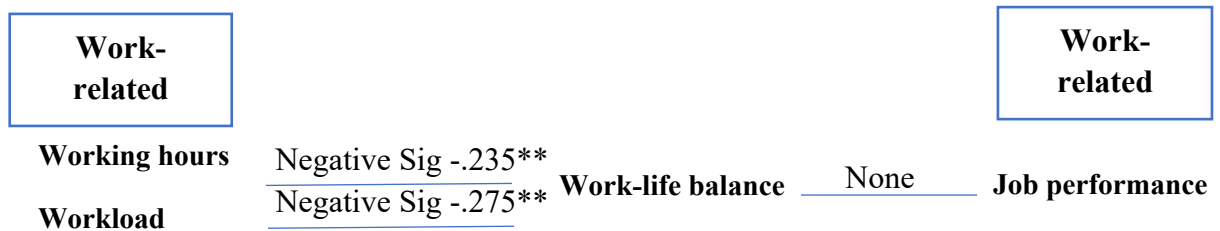
Figure 17 The multi-layered factors of work-life balance in the Chinese context



As Chinese employees' perceptions can be categorised mostly within the framework of work-life integration and enrichment, it is perhaps not very surprising to find that Chinese employees tend to be relatively satisfied with their WLB. However, at the same time it is clear from the findings that most employees are suffering irreconcilable time intrusions and heavy and stressful workloads and it is argued these work demands can deplete their energy and destroy their WLB. While, under the influence of the personal development as well as performance and managerial pressure, the rhetoric of "spontaneous and voluntary" working time and "heavy but under control" workload commonly perceived in the workplace may buffer the negative impact of work demands on employees' WLB, the depletion process is irreversible. As is shown in Figure 18, these work demands have negative relationships with employees' WLB in line with the depletion process of the JD-R model, even though the level of significance is relatively low. Interestingly, there is no

significant link shown between employee's WLB and job performance in this research. It is probably because, in the current Chinese workplace, where the performance-related pay and career prospects are of great values, employees' WLB is far less viewed as a performance motivator by employees and their organisation.

Figure 18 The inter-relationships between main work demands, WLB and Job performance



While work intensification leads to both the irreconcilable work-life tensions and also drives expectation of WLB, work-life imbalance may partially be offset by psychological satisfaction. This can raise wider debates within HRM over organisational policy and context, notably around whether there any work-life supports and management in the Chinese workplace to address with these WLB issues? To respond to this, the next chapter will examine institutional policies and practices (i.e. WLBPPs) and the related workplace context (i.e. WLBC), and their potential impact on employees' WLB (Path 2) and job performance (Path 3).

Chapter Seven: Work-Life Management approaches in Chinese organisations

7.0 Introduction

This second findings chapter seeks to identify and explore the approaches to work-life management and its effectiveness from the perspective of both the employees and organisations. This relates to the third and fourth research questions, and their location within the overall research framework (Path 2 and 3). While Chinese employees seem to perceive a WLB, the high level of work demands leaves Chinese employees less likely to be immune to imbalance and adverse outcomes. Organisational WLB support turns out to be significant here, especially when employees' capacities and extended family resources cannot address the imbalance due to the overwhelming domination of work and its intrusion into the life domain (Cooper and Lu, 2015). In the context of China, the approaches that used to manage employees' WLB, neither the formal institutional support (WLBPPs) nor contextual support (WLBC) have been thoroughly examined in existing research. Little is known about whether, and to what extent, WLBPPs and WLBC are available in the Chinese workplace and effective for both employees' WLB and their job performance. Critically, as the WLBPPs are less institutionalised in China, the formal approaches to work-life management are not prevalent in many organisations, which means the particular focus is required in relation to the workplace context, where the WLBPPs are implemented, and informal approaches are used to manage employees' WLB issues. Based upon both the quantitative and qualitative research data, this chapter presents findings which identify and explore the WLBPPs and WLBC which operate to

address employees' WLB and their organisational outcomes (i.e. job performance) in the Chinese workplace.

This chapter is divided into two main sections that relate to the formal institutional support (WLBPPs) and informal contextual support (WLBC). The first two sections, drawing on Budd and Mumford (2006) and Daniels and French's (2006) research, identifies and explores Chinese WLBPPs in terms of their composition, availability and effectiveness. In section 7.1, as WLBPPs can originate from legislation, policy and organisational initiatives, their availability is assessed. In section 7.2, the effectiveness of WLBPPs is examined from the perspective of employees' and the organisation. Namely, the interrelationships between WLBPPs, WLB, and job performance (as the key organisational outcome), which are discussed in the theoretical framework, are examined. The findings contribute to an understanding of the effect of Chinese WLBPPs, and critically reveal the problems of practical implementation. This is summarised in section 7.3.

As the implementation of WLBPPs is inseparable and complementary to the workplace context (Ryan and Kossek, 2008; Timms et al., 2015), the second part of this chapter explores the WLBC constructed including its composition, availability and effectiveness in the Chinese workplace. Inspired by Kossek et al. (2010) and Dickers et al.'s (2007) research, section 7.4 analyses the availability of WLBC constructed through the organisation, line management and collegial support at both the organisational and departmental level. In section 7.5, the effectiveness of these supports is analysed both in

terms of employee' WLB and job performance, where the support of, and constraints created by, these contextual actors are revealed. The WLBC section concludes with a summary in section 7.6. Finally, the chapter overall is summarised and concluded in section 7.7.

7.1 The availability of work-life balance policies and practices

Formal work-life management involving institutionalised WLBPPs appears not to be the reality in China. Nevertheless, an array of relevant work regulations and social policies, and organisational practices addressing WLB appear to be grouped as relatively formal WLBPPs in the Chinese workplace. As Xiao and Cooke (2012) state, Chinese WLBPPs may originate from two main channels, statutory entitlements and enterprise initiatives. The following reinforces the concept that there are no specific statutory work-life entitlements to secure employees' WLB at the legislative level; and few organisational practices in the name of 'work-life programme/initiatives/practices' have been designed. However, employees may be aware of formal approaches from the labour law and employees' wellbeing policies. Consequently, it is noted that the 'WLBPPs' this research identified are not the pure standardised work-life policies or practices in China, but are, rather, a series of formal policies and practices with WLB functions.

Our state and government do not have similar policies like the west, but working time regulation, annual leave entitlement, and some social security and welfare policies do help (employees' WLB) (B7)

Although our company has no written policies in work-life balance, we do this kind of stuff (A1) [echoed by interviewees A3 and A6]

Chinese WLBPPs may be derived from the institutional, social and business case. At the national level, the government fundamentally attaches importance to the employee's statutory protective rights. While advocating a harmonious employment relationship, employee wellbeing has been gradually institutionalised to cope with the enhanced business pressure and social tensions. While few Chinese-based companies utilise the business case for WLBPPs (Lu and Cooper, 2015; Coffey et al., 2009), organisations promote work-life policies and practices to attract talented employees and to promote the enhancement of business competitiveness. These drivers are indicated by the typical quote from the interviews.

Both state and society are paying more and more attention to employees' rights and interests...the company is also making efforts to retain talent through facilitating employees' WLB (B1).

The following two sub-sections will identify the existence and availability of WLBPPs through analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative research data.

7.1.1 Legislative regulations and political policies

7.1.1.1 The existence and availability of work-life balance policies

Working hours regulation (WHR), leave entitlements, and social security system are the main policies to safeguard employees' work-life rights. Table 19 (below) presents information on the existence and availability of these three types of WLBPPs in the two case organisations. The frequency statistics of the survey data describe the existence and availability, while the chosen quotes from the interview data exemplify and explain the meanings of these statistics.

Table 19 The existence and availability of work-life balance policies (survey and interview data)

Categories	Do not know	Availability	Typical quotes on Existence	Typical quotes on Availability
Working hours regulation Five-day workweek, no more than 8 hours a day and no more than 44 hours a week.	5 (1.6%)	220 (70.5%)	Our company stringently complies with the working time regulations (A1)	‘Nine to five’ does not occur (b8) At the weekend it can be guaranteed to expect peak business time (a5) On average I overwork at least one day at the weekend. (A6)
Leave entitlements At the national legal level: Paid annual leave (includes national holiday/festival leave), sick, marriage, and maternity leave and benefits (can vary municipality and province) At the municipal or provincial regulatory level: paternity leave, and bereavement leave	17 (5.4%)	237 (76.0%)	All legislative leave entitlements are issued in the employment contract (B1)	Employees make the leave requests, and it is approved based upon the premise of ensuring the business and work demands (a5) Most staff do not take leave due to a concern about performance (A7)
Social security system “five insurances and 1 fund” (Pension; Medical, unemployment, employment injury, maternity insurance; housing provident fund)	0 (0%)	307 (98.4%)	We have ‘five insurance and one fund’ (all)	All types of social security are offered to contracted employees...the dispatched worker ³¹ may not benefit from the housing provident fund (a5)

³¹ The meaning of dispatched workers is similar to the agency worker in the west. In China, labour dispatch is the employment method enterprises use under which employees are dispatched by a HR agency specifically engaged in the labour dispatch business. The client enterprise does not have a direct employment relationship with the dispatched employees but uses them for work based on a service contract with the HR agency. Due to its flexibility and lower cost, labour dispatch has traditionally been one of the most popular ways to hire workers in China. Participants in this research do not belong to this category.

Regarding the frequency analysis, the three types of WLPPs are written in an employment contract, but not fully available in the workplace. Specifically, nearly all the respondents (98.4%) believe the social security system has policies for safeguarding employees' WLB. Over three-quarter of respondents report the availability of WHR (70.5%) and leave entitlements (76.0%) respectively in their workplace. The quotes in the table provide more details; confirming survey results about the existence and availability of the three policies, but also unveiling the barriers between the existence and availability.

Working hour regulation (WHR) sets a standard and a bottom-line in the employment contract to secure employees' time-based WLB. However, the implementation is strongly challenged by the long working norm and work intensification as identified in the previous chapter, leaving the unavailability of securing employees' WLB in terms of time.

Leave entitlements are found written into the employment contract, but any form of leave seems to be approved conditionally. Generally, leave will be granted only if the manager believes the leave will have no, or little, impact on work. Namely, business priorities restrict the enforcement of leave entitlements. Furthermore, taking leave is also determined by employees' willingness to request. Since some leave (e.g. annual leave and paternity leave) entitlements may impact on employees' performance-pay and career development, employees would not actively exercise leave rights unless they have to. This may help explain why some employees “voluntarily” give up their annual leave.

The social security system can be widespread, written (into contracts) and available for contracted employees but not for dispatched workers (known as an agency worker in western countries). The limited accessibility can lead to workplace inequality.

7.1.1.2 The connection and gaps of making work-life balance policies available

In terms of the frequency percentage shown in Table 19 (above), the three types of policies are mostly available in both workplaces. The main reason for the high level of availability may result from the characteristics of SOEs, as indicated in the interview data. Despite that, the availability of these policies is not as positive as it appears. Data triangulation identifies the gaps between the existence and availability of WLBPPs and offers indications to explain the gaps.

SOEs are known as legalists, which may make the WLB related regulations and policies more available for employees. Since the three main types of WLBPPs are mandatory in legislation, this guarantees a high level of existence and availability in the Chinese workplace. The SOEs, as an example of being law-abiding employers, are required to strictly and vigorously comply with substantive and procedural policies. This is demonstrated by one of the participants,

All the related labour policies and provisions must be guaranteed...we, SOEs, are the example and standard for other companies in complying with national laws and policies (B11).

However, some policies remain nominal, rather than existing in practice. The disparity between the frequency percentages of existence and availability appears to indicate gaps existing in between. The following content extracted from the interview data can explain the gaps.

The first gap may lie in ineffective legal enforcement and supervision. The lack of enforcement and supervision mean WLB policies fail to be available in practice. The

following quote reflects how those interviewed articulated the problems of policy enforcement:

Although SOEs are relatively good at implementing national policies to protect employees' rights and benefits, there are inadequate legal mechanisms and resources and no legal supervision has been put in place (B3)

As the policies fail to incorporate supporting mechanisms (e.g. sanctions) and resources in their top-level design, this leaves room for the employer or manager to revise the regulation artfully. Therefore, mandatory policies are weakened, making them, in practice, unavailable in the workplace.

The second gap may result from the prioritisation of work demands under unitary management. Although SOEs follow the good employer model, the nature of profitability determines that policies and practices appearing to increase the business costs are not implemented. As is expressed by the following quote, in most cases, managers show empathy when managing employees' workload and permitting leave requests, but due to the business priorities, very often they have to ditch the policies and seek other solutions:

Even if we [SOEs] fully comply with the policies, our nature is profit-making... even if I hope set employee free [i.e. grant employees' flexibility and leave], I cannot do [so], especially during the peak season. Instead, I would communicate with employees in an attempt to ensure both the work needs and employees rest (B5)

The declining union's function on employee service may be the third factor that weakens the availability of WLB policies. Chinese unions have little effect on facilitating employees' WLB. Unlike some western trade unions, where employees' work-life rights can be safeguarded through collective bargaining, a Chinese union is a service department in the organisation that takes the political and social responsibilities for constructing

harmonious employment relationships. This focuses on giving out employee benefits and caring for their work-life needs when appropriate (Brewster, 2007; Warner, 2009). However, the research data reflects this service function is shrinking, and cost-effective business strategies constantly weaken the union's role in terms of influencing employees' WLB. As a company's union will abide by management decisions in a unitary way, the union serves to ensure the company's survival and development rather than serving (wider) employees' needs. The advocacy of humanised working, thus, is only paid lip service. The following quotes highlight this:

The role of the Chinese trade unions is fragile; the union is responsible for employers so that they cannot purely stand for employees as foreign unions do. They are a harmonious protector. While the state emphasises harmonious labour relations and attempts to do something for employees, there is an extra mile to go (B3)

With the enterprise's modernisation, we have more employees and business cost control. In the meantime, the union is downsizing due to the nonprofit-making nature of the union. Only one member of staff is working in our union which serves thousands of employees' welfare issues...there is little time and cost to show humanised care (B6).

Overall, although SOEs are known as the examples of regulatory enforcement and undertake corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Cooke, 2005), the enforcement of WLB policies is problematic, making the availability of these policies limited in the workplace. Externally, inadequate legal supervision leaves the employer room to circumvent employment regulations. Internally, business and performance orientations make the employer, managers, unions and employees less likely to abide with the policies fully. Consequently, these factors make the existing WLB policies less available, reducing the

employee's willingness to exercise their rights and weakening the manager's discretion to permit these rights.

7.1.2 Organisational policies and practices

The employer has the authority to 'top up' the statutory WLBPPs through initiating internal employment policies and HR practices. While WLBPPs are not strategically and systematically a concern of Chinese organisations, driven by the social and political case ("constructing harmonious employee relationship") and the business case (talent attraction and retention, "not working longer but smarter"), the case organisations attempt to facilitate employees' wellbeing through initiating relevant practices in the name of humanised management. However, is the humanised management undermined by the business priorities? It is important and intriguing to examine the extent to which organisational WLBPPs are available in the workplace. This sub-section will first identify the specific WLBPPs existing at the organisational level and then identify their availability through statistical and thematic analysis.

7.1.2.1 The existence and availability of work-life balance practices

The frequency analysis presents a broad picture of the existence and availability of WLBPPs as is shown on the left side of Table 20 (below). In addition to the category of formal flexible working arrangement, most WLBPPs can be found in these Chinese workplaces. Extracted interview data on the right side of Table 20 provides rich but mixed information to understand actual availability. The analysis of the availability for each category is as follows.

Table 20 The existence and availability of work-life balance practices (survey and interview data)

Categories	Do not know	Availability	Sub Categories	Do not know	Availability	Typical quotes on Existence	Typical quotes on Availability
Flexible working arrangements	99 (31.7%)	154 (49.4%)	Tele-working	15 (4.8%)	157 (50.3%)	None of the flexible working arrangement exists in theory; we are all full-time workers (A1)	We have work flexibility in the workplace, mostly for work needs... for example, take-home work, if you say it is teleworking... job sharing for a project... (a5) The availability of work flexibility can vary from job demands - "job position" (a5/B2), "job level (B1)", "work responsibility" (B11)
			Term time	34 (10.9%)	95 (30.4%)		
			Part-time	24 (7.7%)	118 (37.8%)		
			Job-sharing	17 (5.4%)	246 (78.8%)		
			Flexi-start & finish	9 (2.9%)	157 (50.3%)		
Workload management	22 (7.0%)	228 (73.1%)	Training/support	25 (8.0%)	280 (89.7%)	There is no specific workload management scheme (B1)	Workload management turns up in "induction" (a4) and "Management salon" ³² (a5/6/8/b2) ...but "mostly through managers' mentoring and communication (a9)
			Agreeing objectives/targets	19 (6.1%)	262 (84.0%)		
			Agreeing clear and attainable deadlines	12 (6.9%)	142 (45.5%)		
Personal and family life support	43 (13.6%)	219 (70.0%)	Counselling schemes	48 (15.4%)	205 (65.7%)	Psychological counselling (A&B)	We do not have professional psychological counselling; this is undertaken directly by the line managers. (a5/B7)
			Stress management	45 (14.4%)	228 (73.1%)	Stress management scheme in the induction for talent attraction and management (A&B)	The stress management scheme is done for the business needs...not in a sustainable and planned manner; if we have training and learning budgets for each staff (A1/4).

³² In Chinese organisations, "Management salon" refers to a lecture, workshop and seminar for the training and development of employees.

			Help with childcare	39 (12.5%)	215 (68.9%)	Children's educational training (A); The maternal room (A&B); Family day; Parent-child activities (A&B); Children school entry support (A&B).	Our site does not have a specific maternal room. We are in the city centre where the rent is too high to afford one... instead, we set up the seminar room for maternal use temporarily (a4) We had parents' educational training, which was popular but shamefully not on a regular basis (A1)
			Help with elderly care	38 (12.2%)	225 (72.1%)	Elderly condolence in Double Ninth Festival ³³ (A&B)	Caring for the elderly is an individual issue (B6)
Additional work and life initiatives						Typical quotes on Availability	
For personal work and life: Annual bonus (A&B) Mutual aid medical insurance (A) Enterprise annuity as a supplement to pension (A) Meal, transport and housing allowance (A&B) Festival and birthday gifts/ condolence (A&B) Sports and recreational events (A&B) On-site bathroom (A) Employee health check-up (B) Settling-in allowance for Elite and talent attraction (B)			For family life: Families' festival and federal condolence (A&B) Marital consultation support (A) Catering: Families can have and take meals in company refectory (A)			Under the influence of 'The Six Bans and the Eight Regulations' ³⁴ , these employee benefits and activities cannot be fully adopted as we did before (a5/9/b2/B6/b8) These benefits can be adopted with the premise of good company development...also, if there is no conflict with the business need (B7) There is reduced time and costs to show such humanised care under the market competition (B6)	

³³ Double Ninth Festival is an annual Chinese traditional festival for the ancestors and elderly persons.

³⁴ "The Six Bans and the Eight Regulations" is a set of regulations stipulated by the CPC and Central Government. They are first announced on 4 December 2012, at a meeting of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China. These bans and regulations aim at instilling more discipline among party members that seek to tackle the culture of privilege permeated Chinese officialdom and the corruption in socio-economic development. The bans and regulations involve all public organisations, including SOEs and their departments. The relevant contents include: organisations should vigorously streamline the social and commendation activities, and do not engage in festival condolence activities unless approval; It is strictly forbidden to use public funds to engage in mutual visits, gifts, banquets, and organise and participate in high-consumption entertainment and fitness activities, organisational vacations and travelling abroad; It is not allowed to allocate allowances, subsidies, bonuses and in-kind materials without an approval.

Flexible working arrangements are scarcely available in Chinese organisations. In particular, for SOEs, they operate and manage their employment relationships with using full-time working patterns and rarely authorise (formal) flexible working arrangements (Warner, 2009; Lin et al., 2011). The survey data show that the lowest level of availability is for part-time (37.8%) and term-time working (30.4%), which corresponds with existing findings that part-time is not a formal work option in China (Liu et al., 2008). Although around half of the employees (50.3%) state tele-working is available, interview data indicate it is commonly used for the purposes of undertaking additional work (take-work-home) rather than a standard, flexible working pattern. Likewise, around half of employees (50.3%) state “flexible start and finish times” are available, but the cases of flexi-time are often adopted in an employer-friendly way under the managerial discretion as shown in the interview data. While job-sharing shows the highest availability (78.8%), the interview data explain that job-sharing is understood as full-time working where employees coordinate activities in order to complete workload on a project basis. Notably, the meaning of availability shown in the survey data can be reinterpreted by the interview data. Due to the contextual differences, there remain divergent understandings of flexible working practices in the west and China.

While rigid full-time working patterns leave little scope for Chinese organisations, especially in the public sector and SOEs, to develop flexible working arrangements, some work flexibility is available in the Chinese workplace under certain conditions. According to participant B9, the availability of work flexibility can vary according to job demands.

Some line managers have the discretion to work flexibly, and they could informally authorise their subordinates' flexible working too (Blyton, 2011).

We [managers] do have autonomy to work flexibly, but we always work as the result of work responsibility, and on-call is working, even when we are on holiday (B9).

However, this version of flexibility is less likely to bring about balance but more work intrusion. Chinese employees can put forward their temporal leave requests for a personal and family emergency in theory, but only if the manager grants permission can such work flexibility become available. However, both the 'having' and 'authorising' flexibility is largely dependent on business demands. As the following quotes indicate, granting employee flexibility has to be on the basis of either serving work demands or not impact on the work. For example, groups of employees like sales, project and operational staff often have a high level of work flexibility due to the customer-oriented work nature. However, the flexibility along with the 'on-call' customer and business demands may not favour their WLB but simply disguise of the domination and intrusion of work into the personal domain. So, even though some work flexibility is available in the Chinese workplace, it may not be effective for work-life management due to its non-institutionalised and employer-friendly nature. More details related to the effectiveness of work flexibility will be presented in section 7.2.

Granting any flexibility has to be no impact on work (B1).

Sales, project and operational staff have flexibility in time and place due to the work nature of customer orientation (a5).

The approaches to workload management overall show a high level of availability (over 70% on average) in these workplaces. The availability of workload training and support and agreeing with objectives and targets are higher, both over 80%. The interview data to some extent reveals, however, that no systematic workload management has been set up through HRM policies or practice. The reason for the high level of availability may be that workload management is perceived to exist in daily management, informally undertaken by the line manager, in addition to a few relevant pieces of training included in the induction and one-off management salon. The high level of availability shown in the survey is, therefore, more likely to be attributed to supportive line management, rather than formal policies, as one of the participants a9 stated:

The arrangement, management and appraisal of workload are mostly controlled by the management... workload management and training are always involved in daily work operation...many managers are not that arbitrary when arranging our workload; they do mentor and communicate with employees about work targets, deadlines, approach and potential obstacles...deadline seems difficult to be agreed at the beginning. The work progress is largely impacted by the ever-changing business resources, customer needs.

However, even if the line manager can be capable of managing their subordinates' workload in a supportive manner, a9 also mentioned, the ever-changing business context makes the manager and employees difficult to agree on a work deadline. This may be used to explain that the relatively low availability (45.5%) of the sub-types, "agreeing clear and attainable deadline".

Over two-thirds of participants (70.0%) state that personal and family support is available. However, interviewees indicate that the availability is ad hoc rather than provided on a sustainable basis. Employees are aware of the existence of such policies but do not experience professional and continuous use. For instance, as is shown in Table 20 (above), the employee counselling including psychological, marital, children education can be available when needed, but it is conducted through the informal communication with line managers rather than requesting formal polices.

The provision of stress management depends on budgets and is only designed for (those designated as) 'talent' and management. In terms of family support, childcare can originate from the company and line managers, possibly including the provision of aid for children's schooling; assistance for employees with family difficulties; the provision of financial aid for the medical care of employees' families; and visiting and greeting employees' families. These practices can be perceived as recognising the importance of organisational investment in and care for, employees to maintain harmonious employee relationships in the Chinese organisation (Zhang et al., 2012). What may be more substantial is highlighted by interviewees, where line managers could exercise their discretion in permitting family leave or temporary flexibility for family care and emergencies, when needed (the employee requests) and appropriate (work/business conditions allow).

Additional work-life initiatives can be summarised from the open questions in the survey and interviews. With political and socio-cultural demands for “humanised care”, both case organisations show their concern for employees’ wellbeing by providing subsidies for meals, housing, transport, holiday tours, gifts for festivals and birthdays, as well as entertainment and social events. In addition, there are contributions to top-up social security payments and sponsor education and training. However, most of the participants indicate that putting these into practice depends on the economic and political conditions. First, only if a company develops well and steadily, would caring for employees be put forward on the HRM agenda. Secondly, recent political action on potential corruption plays a significant role in restricting these practices into the organisational level. While improving employees’ WLB can be embodied as the flagship of "constructing harmonious society and the employment relationship", this stand in contradiction to the recent advocacy of parsimonious working, where the administrative budget is required to be kept to a bare minimum. The parsimonious advocacy can shrink the organisational budget being allocated for employee' wellbeing. The employer can even cancel additional initiatives to protect themselves from repercussions arising from this political action.

Influenced by the “The Six Bans and the Eight Regulations”, the budgets used to improve employees’ welfare are constrained so that employee benefits like the company/group sports and recreational events are disappearing...when the policy is not convenient to implement, cancellation is a good way to go (a5).

7.1.2.2 The connections and gaps in making work-life balance practices available

While the Anglo-American-defined WLB practices have not existed widely in Chinese organisations, there are some contextualised practices available. This section will

critically examine the connections and gaps in making these practices in the Chinese workplace. First, the interview data reflect that factors such as the company's profitability, consensus over mutual gains and humanised management, may initiate and improve the availability of WLBPPs.

Company growth and development can provide financial backing for an employer to consider work-life management. Employers tend to provide WLB practices if feasible and affordable to those employees who need and request them. As interview b10 noted, "only if the company's profits improve, can welfare policies be considered." By contrast, the minimal budget is available to apply WLBPPs for employees' wellbeing for a company in a downturn or downsizing. The two chosen organisations are in a "booming and benign development" stage, so they are more financially able to "provide the budget to initiate and implement these practices" (B11).

Furthermore, these two case organisations appear to be building a reciprocal to reward employees' dedication. To compensate employees' work commitment, the employer may provide materials (e.g. an annual bonus or daily subsidies) and spiritual rewards (e.g. festival/birthday entitlements for employees and their families) to express 'humanised care' and provide a buffer from possible complaints over the hardships at work (Xiao and Cooke, 2013). This can be interpreted from the cultural perspective as is demonstrated by interviewee A1:

There is the cultural recognition that employees dedicate themselves to work; the enterprise deliberately delivers supportive practices for them. Then, employees feel

the warmth and appreciate the care by working hard. It is a consensus that we do better for the enterprise and ourselves.

This can be ascribed to humanised and paternalistic values. It can be seen as the aesthetic of management in SOEs where employees' benefits can be considered as a moral duty and social obligation of the employer (ibid.). However, as interviewee B11 notes, this is not sufficient to facilitate work-life management:

Under the slogan of the humanised environmental building, the company needs these symbolic tokens and practices to respond to the political and socio-cultural demands, but it may be another story in terms of implementation.

From this perspective, harmonious culture can be a driver that makes WLBPPs available, but such actions may be symbolic and do not necessarily make these effective. The effectiveness of WLBPPs will be examined in section 7.2.

Cost-effectiveness is a crucial goal of all HRM systems (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). The financial costs and administrative burden of WLBPPs appear to be embodied in their design and implementation. For the purpose of cost-effectiveness, the employer may generally marginalise formal work-life management, thus making WLBPPs less available to employees. In the Chinese context, professional HRM is underdeveloped (Cooke, 2005) and systematic WLBPPs are in its infancy. Employers and managers are reluctant to experiment with such a scheme and face the risk of costs rising and administrative difficulties. As interviewee A8 noted:

The biggest obstacle to introducing WLBPPs is cost. If the cost is no problem, we are willing to implement these policies; if the cost is high and uncontrollable with the consumption of workforce and material productivity, we will not do it.

Finally, the rigid full-time working mode does not appear to allow the employer and line managers to provide formalised, flexible working. At the national legal level, employees are not entitled to work flexibly if they have responsibility for caring for dependants. Therefore, employers are unlikely to try and develop their own practices. As interviewee A1 notes, “the company is not likely to jump “out of the box” to apply the flexibility for employees”. Consequently, managerial staff struggle to make decisions over flexibility, caught as they are between rigid working patterns and calls for ‘humanised care’. In China, while the line manager can provide direct support in assisting employees in managing their work-life tension in the name of ‘humanised management’, they are not necessarily able to leverage the resources to support such discretion. Even if there is discretion for them to excise the managerial informality, any informal work flexibility needs to be conducted within the control of external labour and internal organisational policy. As interviewee B6 explained:

Without the formal practices, very often, I only can show verbal empathy by saying ‘hope everything gets well soon’ rather than by providing any substantial support.

To summarise section 7.1, while fully institutionalised WLBPPs are not yet presented in the Chinese workplace, due to the issues of legal compliance, business case and the political demand for humanised care, there are a range of policies and practices that matter for employees’ WLB and can, in the Chinese context, be grouped as WLBPPs.

However, the existence of WLBPPs does not mean they are actually available in the workplace. Such critical barriers as ineffective legal enforcement and supervision, business orientation and the prioritisation of cost-effective management, as well as rigid working patterns, reduce the formal availability of any policies. Having examined the availability of WLBPPs, the next issue is to assess whether, and to what extent, such policies are effective in supporting employees' WLB and contributing to enhanced work behaviour (e.g. job performance).

7.2 The effectiveness of work-life balance policies and practices

The employer and then line managers making WLBPPs available is the first step to implementation. However, the available WLBPPs may not have a positive effect on employees' WLB and their performance. In order to figure out the effectiveness of WLBPPs for both Chinese employees and organisations, this section will present correlation statistics to identify the inter-relationships between WLBPPs, employees' WLB, and job performance. Following thematic analysis on interview data, the causality of the inter-relationships will be explained in depth.

7.2.1 The effectiveness of WLBPPs for Chinese employees

In theory, the adoption of WLBPPs tends to offer employees opportunities and resources to alleviate the tension from the competing work-life responsibilities (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). However, both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the relationship between WLBPPs and WLB does not appear to support this logic. This section starts by presenting the statistically non-significant relationship between WLBPPs and employees'

WLB and then explain the causality by analysing the effect of WLBPPs for employees in terms of the usage and effectiveness.

7.2.1.1 No significant relationship between WLBPPs and employees' WLB

Table 21 (below) shows that WLBPPs and WLB are not significantly correlated, contrary to most of research findings in Anglo-American and European settings (Dikkers et al. 2007; Beauregard and Henry, 2009; Sánchez-Vidal et al., 2012). While the previous section indicated, overall, that there is not an availability issue with WLBPPs, the insignificant relationship appears to show that employees do not perceive their effectiveness. The results appear to be out of line with the JD-R model, which suggests that the WLBPPs can work as a job resource to influence employees' WLB. However, as Voyadanoff (2005) stated, individuals' work-life satisfaction and work effectiveness tend to be achieved when they perceive well-distributed resources. Therefore, perceptions of usage and effectiveness, rather than availability, need to be identified and explored to establish what factors create the gap between available WLBPPs and employees' WLB.

Table 21 Correlation statistics between WLBPPs and WLB (survey data)

		Work-life balance policies and practices
Work-life balance	Coefficient	-.116
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.093
	N	209
Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). "Do not know" was recoded as a missing number, resulting in the n=209 ³⁵		

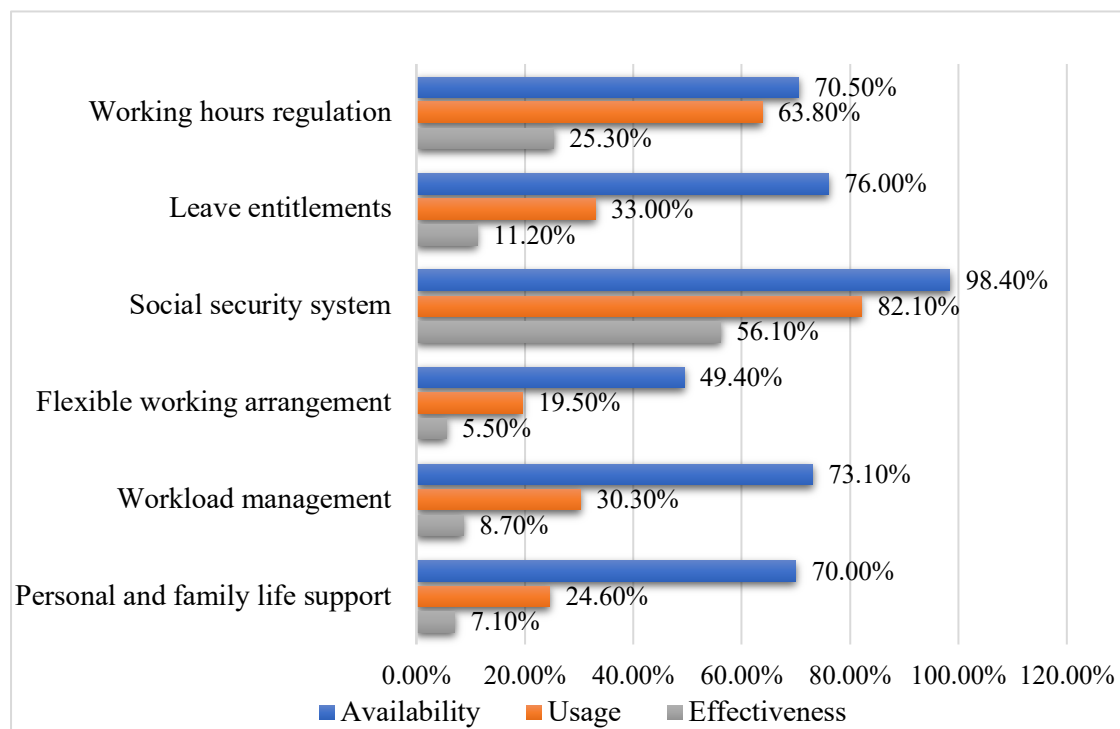
³⁵ Even if employing all the data (N = 312) including the missing value ('do not know' option), the correlation statistic turns out the same that none significant relationship is shown between WLBPPs and WLB.

7.2.1.2 The usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs

Frequency Figure 19, based on the survey data, presents an overview of the availability, usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs (more frequency details are shown in Table 22).

While the WLBPPs are mostly available in the Chinese workplace, the figure indicates that the usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs are much lower than their availability. There are large gaps shown between availability, usage and effectiveness. The reasons for explaining these gaps can be explored from the interview data.

Figure 19 The availability, usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs in the Chinese workplace (survey data)



In terms of the usage, in addition to the mandatory social security system, a large majority of the employees surveyed do not think they can actually use the majority of WLBPPs, which is similar to the Anglo-American findings (e.g. Budd and Mumford, 2006; Beaugard and Henry, 2009). Although WHR and leave entitlements are legally

stipulated in Chinese labour law and written into most of the employees' contracts, the stark reality is that only 33% of respondents report they could use the leave entitlements, and 63.5% of employees are able to entitle the standard working time. Usage is (even) more limited for: flexible working arrangements (19.5%); workload management training (30.3%), personal and family support (24.6%).

Table 22 The availability, usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs in the Chinese workplace (survey data with frequency details)

Categories	Statement	Availability	Usage	Effectiveness
WLB policies	Working hours regulation	220 (70.5%)	199 (63.8%)	79(25.3%)
	Leave entitlement	237 (76.0%)	103 (33.0%)	35(11.2%)
	Social security system	307 (98.4%)	256 (82.1%)	175(56.1%)
WLB practices	Flexible working arrangement	154 (49.4%)	61(19.5%)	17 (5.5%)
	Tele-working	157 (50.3%)	60 (19.2%)	18(5.8%)
	Term time only working	95 (30.4%)	32(10.3%)	10(3.2%)
	Part-time	118 (37.8%)	48 (15.1%)	14(4.5%)
	Job-sharing	246 (78.8%)	93 (29.8)	23(7.4%)
	Flexible start and finish times	157(50.3%)	72 (23.1%)	20(6.4%)
	Workload management	228 (73.1%)	95 (30.3%)	24(8.7%)
	Training /support in managing workload	280 (89.7%)	123(39.4%)	34(10.9%)
	Agreeing objectives and targets	262 (84.0%)	114 (36.5%)	28(9.0%)
	Agreeing clear and attainable deadlines	142 (45.5%)	47 (15.1%)	11(6.3%)
	Personal and family life support	218 (70.0%)	77 (24.6%)	88 (7.1%)
	Employee counselling schemes	205 (65.7%)	64 (20.5%)	14(4.5%)
	Stress management training	228 (73.1%)	85 (27.2%)	23(7.4%)
	Help with childcare care	215(68.9%)	79 (25.3%)	23(7.4%)
	Help with elderly care	225 (72.1%)	79 (25.3%)	28(9.0%)

Even worse, the level of effectiveness drops again from the level of usage. Only a small minority of employees perceive the effectiveness of WHR (25.3%) and leave entitlement (11.2%), although over half (56.1%) find the social security system effective. Moreover,

even fewer respondents experience the effectiveness of organisational WLBPPs, namely: flexible working arrangements (5.5%); workload management (8.7%); personal and family support (7.1%). The underlying reasons behind these gaps between availability, usage and effectiveness are explored in the following sub-sections.

7.2.1.3 The gaps of making available WLBPPs used

The interview data help to rationalise the gaps between the availability and usage of WLBPPs. The gaps can result from both the employee and organisational side: individuals' willingness determines whether the WLBPPs are used; more critically, the managers' attitudes and behaviour are key to their actual uptake.

Employees' perceptions about the available WLBPPs determine whether the given practices will be used in the workplace (Piening, et al., 2014). As WLB is largely regarded as a personal issue, individuals' personal work-life values and arrangements may be an influence on the(ir) use of WLBPPs. The interview data suggest that career-oriented and managerial employees are more willing to give up rights such as holiday leave, fully committing to work; so that even if the company arranges the initiatives for family support, employees may not readily join in.

Many employees have a strong sense of career professionalism and work responsibility so that they would rather sacrifice their holiday to guarantee work, especially managers (A7)

For instance, the family day is generally planned at the weekend; not all staff are willing to attend if they have their own schedules (a4).

Given that, it seems employees' willingness to secure WLB support is not strong, which leads to low usage of the WLBPPs. However, the result needs to be carefully interpreted. As the following two quotes indicate, employees' intentions should be attributed to the workplace context, including collectivism immersion and performance orientation.

The survival of enterprises and the completion of the performance goals are paramount for us...we work hard, and I would feel guilty if I were to go on holiday
(A1)

We do not have time to participate in the welfare activities; if we leave work, the whole work process would pause and even break down, which would affect the work progress and the company's benefits (B6).

On the one hand, the nature of work and employee status do not allow employees to have autonomy over work and personal life boundaries (Hyman et al., 2005); on the other hand, the collectivistic value at work – for the group and company, may curtail WLB expectations and reduce employees' willingness to request WLBPPs. Having understood this, most of the employees uncritically embrace the prioritisation of work performance over the personal arrangement and lifestyle preferences.

Under the pressure of external regulation and political calling, the employers of SOEs comply with the legal enforcement and express their 'humanised care' through initiating a wide range of material, social and spiritual support for employees. However, a second issue to emerge is the subtle undermining of WLBPPs by the company's internal countermeasures. Participant B3 gave a comprehensive explanation to demonstrate this argument as follows:

Although the statutory holiday got extended, “where there is a policy, there is a countermeasure”. The Chinese are very clever. Once a policy is introduced, some business owners try to avoid the disadvantageous part of the policies to protect themselves. Enterprises follow the rules stringently allowing employees to take the leave, but this means losing performance pay. Thus, employees are reluctant to take leave because they do not want the salary loss to affect their quality of life, they desperate to take leave, though.

“Where there is a policy, there is a countermeasure” is a common proverb widely used to characterise the employer and manager's behaviours when implementing external policies in the Chinese public management context. This suggests that employers may exercise actively develop countermeasures to cope with regulations that may cause business costs. While workplace practices, like WLBPPs, are independent, the effect can be undertaken in tandem with other HRM and employment practices such as working hours, job security and performance and pay (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). Such countermeasures as the performance-related pay and promotion system as well as the use of collective spiritual teaching may be artfully played in the workplace, weakening employees' intentions to use WLBPPs. This strategy is well-versed and widely used under the Chinese unitary management, where employees get used to tolerating the workload assigned by the upper management rather than negotiating for rational WLB needs. Consequently, the usage of WLBPPs is restricted so that employees are less likely to request WLBPPs and negotiate for WLB rights and benefits with the manager due to the fear of facing financial problems and career barriers.

The implementation of leave is a typical example. Taking leave is found to be linked with employee performance, pay and promotion directly and indirectly. For instance, part of the annual leave is deemed to be unpaid when leave rights are linked to the performance-related pay system: “I have 15 days annual leave...while I should have had 25 days, only 15 days are paid” (B6). Employees would rather “give up” leave to secure their pay. Another representative example can be maternity leave. While maternity leave can be a stringent and enforceable leave, legally supported and a vital necessity for maternal female employees, the usage of maternity leave is not “go-as-employee-pleases”. As participant B11 explained:

The demand for maternity leave has been increasing since the two-child policy implementation; we may have a queue for female staff who are preparing for pregnancy to minimise the impact on work. The childbearing age female staff may need to report their pregnancy and childbearing plans in advance to line managers for the leave.

Company B may have the countermeasure to deal with the maternity request that requires women to prepare for pregnancy in advance to secure leave. In doing so, the company can benefit from aligning leave with business needs and avoid the costs caused by the unexpected maternity leave. But it is a detrimental measure against human rights and weakens female employees' legal rights to request maternity leave.

A final issue raised around the implementation of WLBPBs, was that participants believed that only if the WLBPBs are fairly implemented, would usage be guaranteed. Line managers often have the discretion to implement WLBPBs and allocate initiatives

to their subordinates, which may leave the manager room to exercise the informality to give access to these initiatives to certain employees (Delbridge and Lowe, 1997; Beauregard, 2014). Notably, informality may be fuelled Guanxi- practices in the workplace; that is, employees who have abundant Guanxi with their line managers are more likely to use the available practices (Tsui, et al., 2004). Employees who are dissatisfied with the fairness of their employer's procedures for allocating WLBPPs may consequently be perceived to display a 'counterproductive' work attitude. These findings could be interpreted from the following typical quotes:

We call for fairness. What tortures Chinese employees is the unequal redistribution of welfare rather than scarcity of policies. Every member of staff should benefit from the company's development dividends rather than only top and senior management (B9)

The line manager revises the practices and creates one-off practices for employees' work-life needs (A4).

Both Anglo-American and Chinese research findings indicate that not all workforces have equal access to workplace practices (e.g. Gregory and Milner, 2009; Cooke, 2005). A significant value is attached to workplace equality by Chinese. Whether workplace policy and practices are equal or not can be one of the critical reasons for variations in levels of work-life satisfaction. The employer should be concerned with equality in the principal design to ensure distributive and procedural fairness through line managers' implementation. Central to this is the provision of financial, structural, and personnel resources to form managerial capabilities that support the implementation of HR practices

(Piening et al., 2014). Line managers often have the discretion to implement WLBPPs and allocate initiatives to their subordinates, which may leave the manager room to exercise the informality to give access to certain employees (Beauregard, 2014).

As a result, employees who are not able to use WLBPPs may have difficulties securing a WLB due to the negative spill-over of work. When employees compare the use of policies through referring to what colleagues have, feelings of inequity may affect employees' engagement and motivation. The negative emotion can spill-over to both work and life domains and result in work-life tension. As is demonstrated by participant B11 who stated:

Employees who cannot use the 'hanging' policies would generally feel helplessness, 'not to matter' and even resentful. Therefore, how come the induced negative emotion leads to WLB?

Overall, whether an employee can use WLBPPs predicts the effect of WLBPPs on their WLB (Allen, 2001; Chou and Cheung, 2013). Notably, the attitudes and behaviours of the employer (policies designer) and line management (policies implementer) can shape the employee's personal intention on the usage of the WLBPPs, thereby impacting the effect of WLBPPs on their WLB. This will be further examined in section 7.4.

7.2.1.4 The problems making used WLBPPs effective

Not all employees who used WLBPPs find it useful for their WLB (Daniels and French, 2006). The frequency statistics (see Figure 19 above) highlight that the effectiveness of WLBPPs sharply drops down when participants were asked to assess the usefulness of practices they "have used". The gap between the usage and effectiveness can be examined

using the interview data, where the demands of work and potential career consequence of using policies may explain the low level of effectiveness.

Mediated by technology and communication, employees can be “hanging on” for work at any place and any time. For example, off-work status and taking leave do not mean employees are able to be free from work responsibility. The on-call nature of work extends atypical working hours, threatening employees’ WLB through negative spill-over (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Accordingly, WLBPPs, even if used, can become insignificant when employees suffer work intensification. This is probably because WLBPPs are only a peripheral support that provides limited concession to the core work systems, such as the high-performance work system, enabling “always working” and “always standing by for work” to become the main melody in the Chinese workplace. As the interviewees stated:

I heard that a staff member of mine said: even if it is 11 o'clock, I dare not to take off my shoes to sleep (A10)

Even when I am on holiday; I may have 10 to 20 work calls; in fact, I am still at work (B6).

All-pervasive work demands impact on the employee's satisfaction when using WLBPPs. Taking the survey participants' responses to workload management as an example, “Agreeing clear and attainable deadlines” is believed to have the poorest effect for WLB. One of the participants (A1) respond to this by criticising the rapidly changing business environment, which makes the agreeing workload problematic:

It always happens that there is new and temporary work beyond the fixed and planned schedule. The business context is too changeable to follow the original plan. If we stick to the agreed plan and cannot keep up with changing plans, we cannot make it [work].

A fixed work plan does not appear to exist; instead, work arrangements require that employees adapt to the business demands, with any change at work likely to disrupt the planned personal schedules. Consequently, the marginalisation of employees' WLB seems to be an understandable normality.

Furthermore, while employees who used WLBPPs would be seemingly beneficial, in the long run, they believe they may risk their career consequences by utilising such policies. Eaton (2003) states that WLBPPs can be ineffective unless employees are free to use them without regard to pay and career consequences. It seems there is no explicit disparity in the concept of “effective employee” between the western and non-western context, namely an employee who is willing and able to work long hours and is unhampered by domestic responsibilities. Work efficiency and commitment are often judged based on presence in the workplace (McDonald et al., 2012), and there is a necessity for employees to be visibly productive and physically available to deal with work issues.

As far as employees in the research are concerned, taking advantage of WLBPPs to a large extent results in less presence in the workplace. Consequently, they create an “adverse record” that diminishes long-term career development. As B7 explained:

If the leave is long, or too frequent, managers and colleagues subconsciously feel like the member of staff does not take work seriously so that the staff performance evaluation and job promotion will be impacted.

In terms of a managerial perspective, allowing employees to use the WLBPPs is a “goodwill gesture” that implies trust and expectation. However, participant B11 critiques the goodwill. Employees are expected to pay back by working harder and more productively, meaning working longer hours and additional workload. In reality, the intention to promote work-life management may impose employees’ work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Hence, the effect of WLBPPs is less likely perceived by positively employees but rather a cause of “hidden trouble”.

Managers can exercise their discretion to give us flexibility for an "emergency", but it doesn't 100% work for our WLB. To pay back this trust, I need to be more hardworking, i.e. working additional and atypical hours to keep up the workload, the work can completely squeeze my personal time. Is my balance better or worse?
(B11)

Employees fear to challenge organisational and managerial decisions and work arrangements due to possible repercussions and consequences. Where such cultures exist, so employees remain tolerant of the ineffectiveness of WLBPPs. The power differentials between employer and employee created a win-lose scenario where employees trade-off certain life activities to meet the work demands in the workplace.

In summary, this section helps to explain why there is no statistically significant link between WLBPPs and WLB. The survey data highlighted gaps between the existence

and effectiveness of WLBPPs and the interview data help to explain the reasons for this: WLBPPs are often seen to be at odds with corporate priorities and traditional working patterns; internal countermeasures and managerial informality limit employees to WLBPPs; and the all-pervasive nature of work and potential risks to career jeopardise WLBPPs from playing the role for employees' work-life needs. However, it has been argued that the WLBPPs can enhance organisational functioning from an individual employee to the organisational level (Kossek et al., 2010). Therefore, the next section will examine whether, and to what extent, the limited effectiveness of WLBPPs perceived by employees' impacts on their job performance.

7.2.2 The effectiveness of work-life balance policies and practices for Chinese organisations

While the 'business case' for work-life management is starting to be recognised, it has yet to become mainstream and promoted in Chinese organisations. Chinese employers lack awareness of, and capacity to formalise, WLBPPs into strategic business and HRM concerns. As organisational characteristics are argued to relate to employees' work-related outcomes through the use of WLBPPs (Peretz et al., 2018; Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017), the positive link found between WLBPPs and employees' business-like behaviour (e.g. performance enhancement) may contribute to strengthen organisational awareness of employees' work-life needs and promote work-life management within Chinese HRM. This section will identify and explore the effectiveness of WLBPPs for Chinese organisations, focusing on the relationship between WLBPPs and employees' job performance. To do so, the correlation between

WLBPPs and job performance will be examined using the survey data; then the interview data will be used to explain the causality and explore the potential effect of WLBPPs on the two organisations in theory and practice.

7.2.2.1 The positive relationship between WLBPPs and job performance

The correlation statistics shown in Table 23 present a positive relationship between WLBPPs and job performance. The statistically significant relationship corresponds with the assumptions behind the theoretical framework and the explanation of this found in social exchange theory. WLBPPs can act as resources to tap into employees' potential to engage with work; then in return, employees may feel an obligation to work harder and perform better.

Table 23 Correlation statistics of WLBPPs and job performance (survey data)

		Work-life policies and practices
Job performance	coefficient	.179**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009
	N	209
Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). "Do not know" was recoded as a missing number, resulting in the n=209		

However, the relationship is direct and not mediated by employees' WLB because there was no statistically significant correlation identified between WLBPPs and WLB. One of the interviewees, a5 offers a reasonable explanation:

The perceived WLBPPs do not necessarily lead to our WLB; we have to hold on to work responsibility as always. However, we appreciate the 'convenience' given from managers and the organisation. We feel like behind the trust, compassion and empathy they expect us to return what we can do, which is working hard.

Employees appreciate the “goodwill” shown from the policy maker (the employer) and their implementer (the manager) and then feel an obligation to respond in kind with a reciprocal behaviour, for instance, working harder and longer to compensate for the ‘favour’. Therefore, the extra work effort may bring about the enhancement of employees’ performance. Nevertheless, the hardworking commitment does not necessarily benefit their own WLB and may even increase their own work-life tension due to the additional work spill-over.

Nevertheless, the managerial staff, B4 indicates the perspective vision that adopts the WLBPPs for sustainable organisational development. The following quote demonstrated having WLBPPs in the Chinese workplace seems to fit into the organisational social and business cases.

The WLBPPs seem very necessary because they involve employees' humanised needs and sustainable organisational needs. An enterprise may be more profitable if the adoption of WLBPPs is conducive to tapping into employees’ potential and enhance their performance.

It not only appears to be in tune with the advocated ‘humanised management’ but may create profitability from the employees’ reciprocal behaviour. Indeed, plenty of interviewees confidently affirmed WLBPPs can be a ‘best practice’, but this proposition is an assumption and yet to be a fact. At the back of ‘if’, some interview data reveal that it might be a utopian vision considering the existing barriers that constrain the effectiveness of WLBPPs for the organisation. This will be elaborated in the next section.

7.2.2.2 Barriers for achieving the effectiveness of WLBPPs for the organisation

The barriers to achieving effective WLBPPs in Chinese organisations may be the low awareness and capacity of work-life management both in the external business context and internal organisational context.

At the national level, the WLB agenda may work as the essential by-product of the economic development stage (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017). China remains in the developing stage, where the legal legislation and political force tend to serve the economic development substantially. This increases the difficulties in regulating the mandatory work-life agenda and allows organisations to marginalise employees' work-life right and benefits. Kehoe and Wright (2013) argue that any HR practices expecting certain desired employee outcomes need employees to experience them in their intended ways consistently. However, these WLBPPs have hardly been adapted for employees' diversified work-life needs, which limits the behaviour of 'employer-employee reciprocity' in a sustainable manner. As participant B4 stated:

China is still in the primary stage of socialism, and the priority is economic development. With this focus, Chinese employers are not likely to carefully concern their staff's work-life needs and believe the reciprocity of WLBPPs.

At the organisational level, the employer's awareness of WLB is a pivotal step to initiate a 'WLB discourse'. While Chinese people management has been transiting from the personnel management to HRM, the tradition of paternalism is deeply embedded especially in the SOEs (Cooke, 2005). As BI states, "leadership and management style

can determine the development of a company.” Without any strong external drivers, the employer tends to assume that WLBPPs may be incompatible with the organisational needs, and any social commitment is expected to be compromised by business demands in practice (Williams et al., 2017). The employer would rather regard these practices as a cost in the short-term than a benefit in the long terms as the following quotes demonstrate,

It depends on the employer’s awareness and primary concern...we still focus on business efficiency for the short-term goals... WLBPPs are still a fairy tale (B4).

Indeed, there is little evidence in the academic literature of a direct link between work-life management and organisational profitability. While WLB research is developing and management initiatives are being conducted in the MNCs and among far-sighted large enterprises in China (e.g. Lu and Cooper, 2015; Xiao and Cooke, 2012), these are too immature to be popularised in the Chinese-based companies. Organisations generally assess WLBPPs, like many other policies and practices, in terms of cost-benefit analysis (McDonald et al., 2005). For instance, comparing high-performance work practices to WLBPPs, the cost-benefit ratio of WLBPPs for the organisation is difficult to measure. Therefore, it appears unattractive to a Chinese employer to develop work-life management at the strategic level, although they would like to verbally agree with their belief that WLBPPs would improve employees’ performance.

Supportive WLBPPs would improve job performance. However, this investment must consider the cost-benefit ratio of WLB practices. If the entire cost of designing and implementing the practices can bring the firm much more profits, why not? However, work-life balance practices are too vague to present a clear ratio to employers...no desired measurement techniques to measure it, unlike like the straightforward high-performance work practice (B8).

Consequently, in such a performance-oriented workplace, employees' WLB has yet to be aligned into the strategical concerns. Work dedication and commitment are highlighted regardless of other commitments (e.g. work-life commitment). The employer prefers to select and work with like-minded managers and employees, making it difficult to foster a work-life workplace from top to bottom. Even if some line managers would like to show empathy and help for employees' WLB, lacking empowerment constrains them to grant any forms of WLBPPs in practice. Hence, given limited external and internal driving forces to promote effective work-life management, the expected social exchange, WLBPPs to job performance, is less likely to occur.

Hardly ever has the executive considered work-life management at the strategical level; work-life support is not mainstream; work is our centrality. The leaders find the like-minded staff to work together and they are not likely to like the employee who pursues balance rather than hard work. Therefore, even though the line managers understand employees' situation, nothing really could be done (a9).

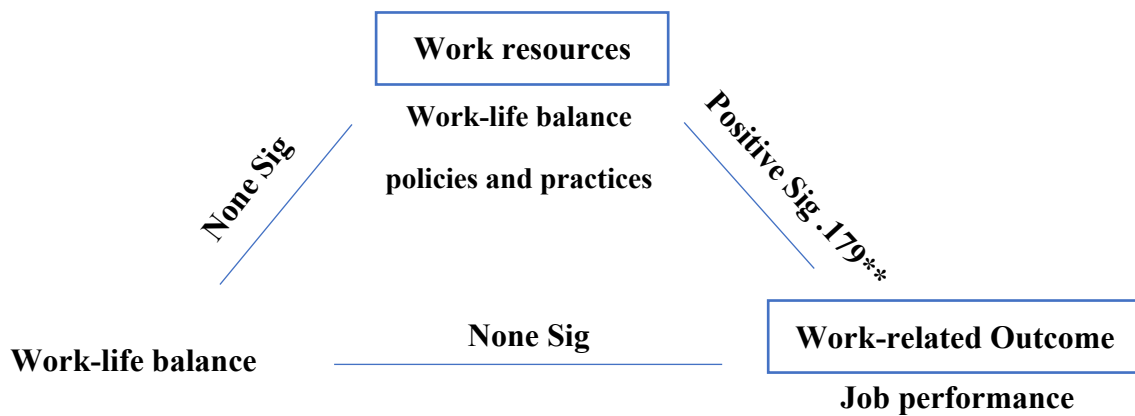
Overall, it is complicated to try to identify the effectiveness of WLBPPs for organisational development in China. While findings unveiled the positive relationship between WLBPPs and job performance drawn from the perspective of reciprocity, it is not possible to conclude that WLBPPs, as best practices, have been embedded into the strategic HRM. The current barriers including scarce external driving forces and internal strategic concerns still restrict the effect of WLBPPs on Chinese organisations.

7.3 Summary of work-life balance policies and practices in Chinese organisations

The first half of the chapter critically examined under-documented Chinese WLBPPs in terms of composition, availability and effectiveness from the perspectives of the employee and manager. While WLBPPs have yet to be clearly identified as a series of policies and practices in China, a range of policies and practices that matter for employees' WLB can be identified as falling within the scope of WLBPPs. These consist of WHR, leave and social security, all regulated by legislation, as well as diversified and ad hoc practices in relation to work flexibility, workload management and work and family support at the organisational level. However, critical barriers such as ineffective legal enforcement and supervision, prioritising business demands and cost-effectiveness, along with traditionally rigid working patterns make WLBPPs less available at the workplace. Having established the availability of different WLBPPs, this section then examined the effect of WLBPPs for both employees and organisations by identifying the inter-relationships between WLBPPs and WLB (part of Path 2), and job performance (part of Path 3) respectively. The mixed quantitative and qualitative findings depicted the intricate link of inter-relationships. For employees, survey data showed WLBPPs are not positively related to their WLB (see Figure 20 below). The statistically non-significant relationship indicates having WLBPPs does not necessarily mean they are useful. There are significant gaps between the availability, usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs in the workplace. The interview data revealed the gaps existing between the availability, usage, and effectiveness of WLBPPs. Externally, the ineffective enforcement of job regulations and economic pressures allow work demands to be prioritised and WLB to be

marginalised in Chinese organisations. Within the WLBPPs are often seen to be at odds with corporate priorities and traditional working patterns, while internal employer countermeasures and managerial informality constrain the usage of WLBPPs. In short, the all-pervasive intrusion of work and potential career risks jeopardises WLBPPs from playing a role in addressing employees' work-life needs.

Figure 20 The inter-relationships between the work resource (WLBPPs), WLB and Job Performance



Furthermore, findings are also mixed in terms of whether, and to what extent, WLBPPs affect employees' job performance. From the perspective of reciprocity, the positive relationship between WLBPPs and job performance is statistically established from the survey data, but it by no means indicates WLBPPs can be a best practice. The interview data highlighted the main barriers existing at the external regulatory and internal management levels, which may limit the benefits of WLBPPs in terms of employees' job performance.

This section contributes to addressing the third research question that sought to identify and explore Chinese WLBPPs and their effect on employees and their organisations. It examines path 2 and 3, regarding WLBPPs, within the theoretical framework. Findings derived from data triangulation are mixed. It partly indicates that WLBPPs, as a job resource, are positively impacting employees' WLB and job performance. This can be interpreted by the motivation process of the JD-R model and social exchange theory. Notably, the insignificant link between 'WLBPPs-WLB' does not 'overthrow' path 2 located in the theoretical framework but suggest that only the perception of, rather than the operation of, WLBPPs works as a job resource on employees' WLB. WLBPPs are largely problematic where there are external and internal factors to constrain the availability, usage and effectiveness, limiting the role of WLBPPs as a 'best practice' approach. This will be returned to in the discussion section of Chapter 8 where it is argued the lack of strategy and problems or implementation are at the centre of the difficulties facing Chinese work-life management.

Interestingly, participants recognised the low effectiveness of WLBPPs but appeared not to be bothered by this. As one of typical quotes from a5 mentions:

“Even though our employees could understand [that] many policies and practices like WLBPPs cannot be effectively put into implementation...What we hope is that our working atmosphere would be better and [we] get more care from our superiors.”

No matter whether this perception comes from their rationality or helplessness, the quote indicates that the workplace atmosphere and managerial care seem to be of great value.

It echoes the importance of the workplace context in implementing WLBPPs and

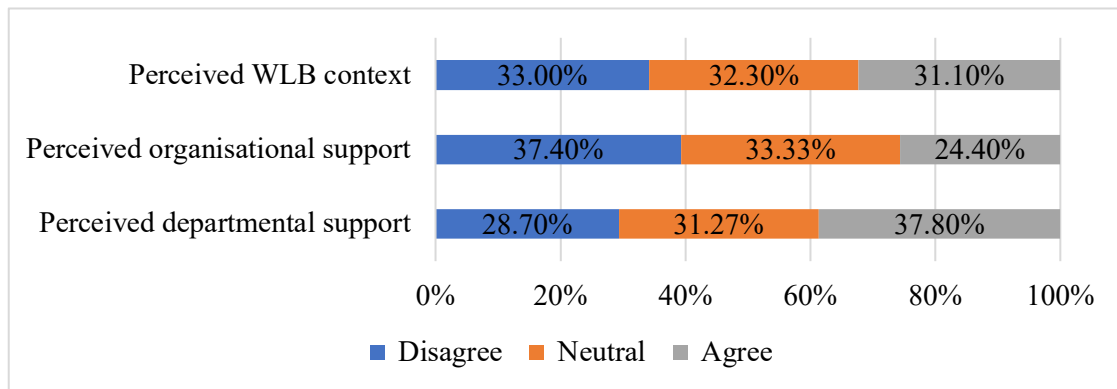
highlights why this research seeks to examine WLBPPs in conjunction with its relevant work context. To do so, it is now appropriate to analyse how the contextual work-life support is constructed and how this relates to work-life management in the Chinese workplace.

7.4 The work-life balance context

The findings indicate that formal institutionalised support, through WLBPPs, is underdeveloped in the Chinese workplace, leaving room to examine the informal work-life support in the workplace context. This section aims to examine the available work-life balance context (WLBC) constructed at the organisational and departmental level respectively through the data triangulation. The influence of work-life contextual support (Kossek et al., 2010) on WLB can be examined at the organisational level, by exploring the organisational culture/climate and the role of top management, and at the departmental level by exploring managerial and collegial attitudes and behaviours. Identifying the available WLB context constructed in the Chinese workplace lays a foundation to subsequently analyse its influence.

The Figure 21 derived from the survey data show participants' general response to the WLB context. Overall, only less than one-third of participants (31.1%) perceived they have a positive WLB context in the workplace, among which the majority reported the support is more likely to occur at the department level. The statement details of the WLB context scale are shown in the following Table 24.

Figure 21 The frequency statistics of the perceived WLB context (survey data)



It is noted that a considerable proportion of the participants held a neutral attitude towards WLBC. This can be explained by two points. First, Chinese samples tend to have a bias towards the central point (Hui et al., 2004). The neutral orientation is viewed as a manifestation of traditional Chinese doctrine of the golden mean that refers to “the spirit of reasonableness”, which requires avoiding all excesses of theory and conduct (Xing, 1995: 20). This explanation is also demonstrated in the interview data. For instance, B11 indicates that employees appear to avoid extreme views when reporting their ideas on the organisational and departmental support:

The Chinese culture of neutrality reflects how people tend to avoid rating the best and also criticising badness when they need to express their opinion.

Second, the central point is a safe choice for employees who find it difficult to identify a WLB context. As participant a5 notes, the organisation does commit to caring for employees, but it does not mean employees can perceive the care; the policy and financial constraints can discount the goodwill in practice.

Keeping the neutral attitude towards the supportive work-life environment is probably because it is difficult for us to judge... managers treat us as well as they

could, but there are many other limitations constraining their intention, for example, policy conflict, and budgets limits.

This ambiguity also provides an opportunity for this research to analyse the availability and effectiveness of the WLBC constructed at the organisational and departmental levels in the following two sections.

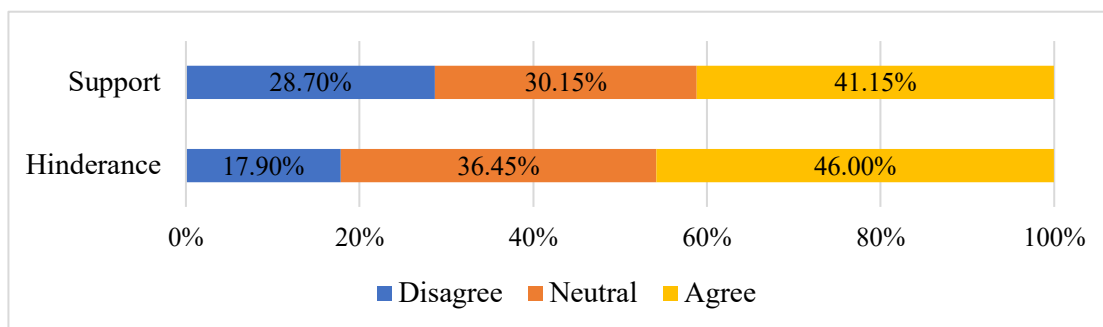
Table 24 The perceived work-life balance context (survey data with frequency details)

WLB context	Statement	Strong disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Organisational support	In general, my company is considerate towards employees' private situation.	12(3.8%)	54(17.3%)	83(26.6%)	151(48.4%)	12(3.8%)
	My company is supportive of employees who want to switch to less demanding jobs for private reasons.	24(7.7%)	89(28.5%)	105(33.7%)	88(28.2%)	6(1.9%)
Organisational hindrance	If necessary, employees within this company are expected to prioritize their work over their private situation. (R)	9(2.9%)	36(11.5%)	106(34.0%)	127(40.7%)	34(10.9%)
	In order to be taken seriously in this company, employees should work long days and be available all the time. (R)	11(3.5%)	46(14.7%)	104(33.3%)	120(38.5%)	31(9.9%)
	In this company, employees who [temporarily] reduce their working hours for private reasons are considered less ambitious. (R)	15(4.8%)	62(19.9%)	128(41%)	94(30.1%)	13(4.2%)
	Employees who turn down a promotion because of private circumstances will suffer negative career consequences within this company. (R)	8(2.6%)	32(10.3%)	117(37.5%)	130(41.7%)	25(8.0%)
Managerial support	My line manager supports employees who want to switch to a less demanding job because of their private situation.	8(4.57%)	37(21.14%)	59(33.71%)	66(37.71%)	5(2.86%)
	My line manager supports employees who (temporarily) want to reduce them working hours for private reasons.	12(3.8%)	32(10.3%)	77(24.7%)	179(57.4%)	14(4.5%)
Collegial support	My colleagues support employees who temporarily want to reduce their working hours for private reasons.	4(1.3%)	22(7.1%)	87(27.9%)	189(57.7%)	19(6.1%)
	My colleagues help me out if I am having a hard time coping with my caregiving responsibilities.	16(5.1%)	46(14.7%)	136(44.6%)	108(34.6%)	6(1.9%)

7.4.1 Work-life balance context at the organisational level

Dickers et al. (2007) argue that at the organisational level, there are two dimensions of support and hindrance affecting the WLB context. This argument is empirically reflected in the case organisations as is shown in the Figure 22 below. Critically, participants perceive slightly more as a hindrance than support at the organisational level. Over two-fifths (41.1%) of participants report they had work-life support from the organisational context, but 46.0% of participants perceive them as a hindrance.

Figure 22 The frequency statistics of the perceived work-life balance context at the organisational level (survey data)



The interview data also identify the WLB context at the organisational level in terms of support and hindrance. As the following quote from participant A4 demonstrates, the Chinese WLB context at the organisational level, embodied in the organisational culture and norm, can be generally labelled as humanised care:

Generally, we care for employees; this is our corporate culture immersed in [our] overall business strategy, human resources management strategy, and the core values of leadership. The atmosphere of humanised management is a result of the influence of senior leadership, and then gradually and hierarchically it is delivered to the staff. This people management helps to strengthen employees' sense of belonging and controls the turnover rate.

Humanised care is a prevailing concept in China that refers to the extent to which fairness, altruism, and generosity are encouraged in a community and society (Javidan et al., 2006). Particularly, the CPC has set the political agenda for “constructing a harmonious society” that requires enterprises to take political and social corporate responsibility to internalise the value of ‘humanised care’ from the strategic to operational management level (Warner, 2008; Cooke, 2013). Senior manager B1 believes that humanised care is ready to be incorporated into the organisational culture for strategic organisational development. For the purpose of the business case, humanised care is valued for strengthening employee retention. From the cultural perspective, humanised care is seen as a moral duty and social obligation of the employer given Chinese paternalistic values and management aesthetics, particularly in SOEs (Cooke, 2013). The employer, as the pioneer of a culture builder, takes the responsibility to shape and embed humanised values into the organisational culture. Guided by that, subordinate management levels need to digest these values and internalise humanised elements into their management style. The critique is raised from the employee side, as is stated by a9:

The company is aware of the balance value as a sort of humanised care in the organisational culture, but it is more like a slogan used by the employer, lacking substantial stuff to really internalise the ‘humanised care’ into our working life.

While the idea of a supportive organisational culture and leadership is developed conceptually, it has yet to be demonstrated in practice. As is claimed by Xiao and Cooke (2012), humanised care remains a management aesthetic. As a response, the senior manager B1 admitted this failure but attempted to pass the buck to employees’ shoulders by saying WLB would not be appreciated by employees:

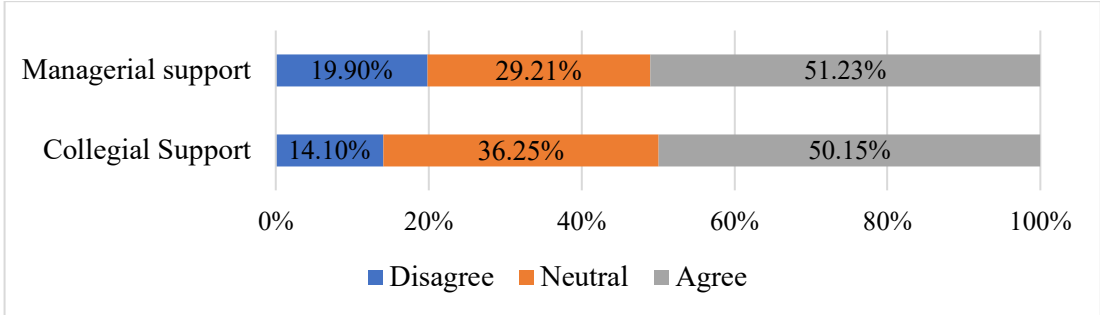
We cannot highlight the “balance” value in practice...our employees have a sense of crisis and competitiveness under the stricter performance appraisal system (B1).

Indeed, WLB is undervalued by employees, but it might not be their personal choice. As SOEs transition toward more self-directed and market-focused organisations (Denison et al., 2011), employees have little opportunity to value ‘balance’ in a situation of 'survival of the fittest' underpinned by high-performance work systems. As a result, organisational humanised care is difficult to achieve faced with external market competition and internal performance pressures. This helps to explain the survey findings that barriers are perceived to be slightly more apparent than support when considering the WLB context.

7.4.2 Work-life balance context at the department level

Support from managers and colleagues could contribute to the construction of favourable WLB context at the department level (Dickers et al., 2007). This is reflected in the case organisations as is shown in Figure 23 below. Around half of participants agree they perceive the WLB context is constructed from the managerial and collegial supports. More details will be analysed from the interview data.

Figure 23 The frequency statistics of the perceived WLB context at the department level (survey data)



HR policies and practices can be conducted formally and informally with line management (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2017). In work-life management, line managers are in charge of implementing WLBPPs, and the delivery of humanised care lies within their managerial discretion. Considering formal work-life support is underdeveloped in the Chinese workplace, few relevant HR policies and detailed guidelines are available for

line managers. The Chinese line manager takes the primary responsibility for managing employees' WLB informally in the name of 'humanised management'. As participant B1 mentions in the following quote, the Chinese line manager plays a vital role in fostering a WLB workplace.

This (work-life management) can be an important part of our humanised management. Even if we don't have the policy, what works better is we train our managers to care about their staff, 'put ourselves in their shoes' to have concern for their needs, build up a closer relationship with staff, and consciously cultivate a friendly work atmosphere...the line manager is essential to create a supportive workplace.

With the advocacy of humanised care at the organisational level, it is argued managers are trained to consciously, sympathetically and flexibly play their informality with discretion when dealing with employees' work-life issues.

Furthermore, strong collegiality maintained in the workplace can lay a foundation to foster the WLB context. Interpersonal helping among colleagues can relieve employees' work-life tensions in terms of time, place and strain. The following quotes show two main channels of interpersonal helping: instrumental (e.g. temporary job cover, teamwork, work and life mentoring), and emotional (e.g. empathy) support.

This is a common phenomenon that colleagues help each other with work or personal life issues. If any work problem occurs, we do not blame others but help to deal with things... everyone could encounter a new and difficult time in life, and then the colleague would help to cover the work temporarily (a5)

We are friends after work... junior staff share the creative and trending stuff with seniors and seniors share work and life experience with them (B6).

By contrast, instrumental support is less available than emotional support. The helping spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Due to the independence of each job position, it is difficult for employees to give one another a hand to handle extra work responsibilities. Given that, while interpersonal helping temporarily releases the employee's time-based tension on the surface, employees who benefit from this may be still pressurised by the unfinished workload. This may partly explain why a relatively high percentage (36.3%) of respondents take a neutral view towards the impact of collegial support on their WLB.

Generally, colleagues are willing to give a hand. However, only the simple stuff could be covered such as uploading documents, for each person the work responsibility is too independent to be covered easily (B7).

Overall, the Chinese WLBC can be constructed at the organisational and department level, especially given the wider political and social pressures to provide 'humanised care', and there are three potential influences: organisational culture; all level of managers and co-workers. At the organisational level, the employer advocates embedding humanised care into the organisational culture, although there is a possibility that the humanised care is only paid lip service to, given business and performance pressures. More importantly at the department level, the social interactions between managers and among colleagues may be conducive to construct and foster a WLBC. In particular, the line manager can use managerial informality that directly influences employees' WLB. This raises the question as to whether this constructed WLBC can be perceived by Chinese employees and, therefore, has an effect on their WLB and job performance. This will be addressed in the next section.

7.5 The effectiveness of work-life balance context in the Chinese organisation

While the WLB context constructed from organisational culture, managerial informality and collegial interpersonal helping may be valuable in the Chinese workplace, whether these are perceived by employees is unclear. This section will identify and explore whether and to what degree the WLBC benefits employees and organisations. In the meantime, this section seeks to examine the inter-relationships of WLBC and employees' WLB (part of path 2), and job performance (part of path 3) located in the theoretical framework through correlation and thematic analysis.

7.5.1 The effectiveness of work-life balance context for Chinese employees

This section seeks to identify the relationship between the WLB context and employees' WLB based upon the correlation statistics from the survey data and interprets issues of causality based upon the interview data.

7.5.1.1 The positive relationship between WLBC and employees' WLB

Table 25 shows WLBC is significantly correlated with employees' WLB. Among the three supports, the coefficients indicate that organisational support and employees' WLB have the strongest correlation. Only if the organisation genuinely concerns itself with employees' WLB, are the actors at the department level legitimised to operationalise the values of humanised care into all levels of daily management. The organisational support lays the foundation to foster a workplace supportive of employees' WLB.

Table 25 Correlation statistics of work-life balance and work-life support in the context (survey data)

		Overall work-life support	Organisational support	Managerial support	Collegial support
Work-life balance	coefficient	.235**	.265**	.129*	.120*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.022	.034

	N	312	312	312	312
Notes: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					

The interview data mostly aligns with the survey findings and help reveal the causality between WLBC and employees' WLB. For example, the following quote from participant (a9) not only recognises the effect of WLBC but also indicates how it influences employees' expectations.

A pleasant and harmonious working atmosphere could improve employees' engagement and reduce negative emotion at work. This atmosphere is significantly more effective than material rewards in most cases. Unless the pay is higher than employees' expectations, the negative spill-over from the demands of work may be eased. Otherwise, "one bite of a sweetener" is not enough.

Chinese employees expect and appreciate the supportive work environment with the increasing focus of work and life quality (Spector et al., 2007; Xiao and Cooke, 2012). Since the WLBC is valued, financial rewards do not appear strong enough to leverage employees' motivation. The economic benefits that work can bring to employees can be diluted or even negated unless anchored in a pleasant and harmonious working atmosphere. This can be interpreted by the JD-R model; a positive WLB context is valued as a job resource that offers employees' opportunities to manage their work commitments and family responsibilities. This finding echoes the Anglo-American WLB research that employees tend to have not too bad WLB if they are working in a positive WLB context (De Cieri et al., 2005; Dikkers et al. 2007; Gordon et al., 2007).

7.5.1.2 Double-edged managerial informality

The interview data, however, highlight the influence of the line manager rather than the organisation on employees' work-life experience. With few WLBPPs institutionalised, employees may not perceive there to be direct and substantial support from the

organisation. In comparison, the line manager is more likely to understand employees' work-life needs and offer tangible and prompt support. As JD–R theory suggests, social support in the workplace can serve to protect and enhance employees' work resources (Deremouti et al., 2011).

The executive team highlights the humanised management, but it will not be direct and substantial. Instead, the responsibility is undertaken by the manager whom we are working with every day, and he is able to spot out our needs and offer any possible help (A6).

The following quote explains how the line manager can engage with work-life management in several distinct ways: they can reasonably manage employees' workload to alleviate employees' time-based tension; they can ask and negotiate employees' work-life needs and propose a decision of informal practices when needed; they can show their empathy to relieve employees' strain-based tension.

When employees need help either in work or life domain, most of the managers and colleagues proactively give a hand. For example, they temporarily alleviate and cover their work tasks, and console them to reduce their mental stress...for some employees in the sales, marketing and project departments, for example, their working path is customer-oriented, so that they are authorised to work flexibly for the business needs (B1).

For the specific group of employees, the line manager can grant them autonomy to work flexibility even just for business needs. These different supports are in line with Li et al.'s research (2017) where the role of the line manager plays an effective role in work-life management through subsuming task, interpersonal relationships, ethical orientations, and change management. However, the interview data reveal the concern that in less institutionalised work-life management, the authority boundary given to exercise the informality is largely unclear for the line manager, and the positive effect of managerial

support can be undermined by business demands and the manager's personal cognition and capability.

First, the discretion given to the line manager is primarily to deliver performance objectives that serve the profitability of the business. To achieve this, the line manager not only manages employees' work for the purpose of a performance improvement but also cares for the employee to minimise a negative spill-over from life to work. As the participant A7 outlines, the line manager does possess certain discretion to balance the business and employees' demands.

We would arrange leave for employees in an off-peak business season rather than peak season. This way not only alleviates the contradictions in the work process but also takes care of employees' work-life balance.

However, some line managers feel placed in a dilemma: they are willing to support employees' work-life needs, but this supportive intention can be undermined by the authoritarian workplace regimes and business demands. As is found in Anglo-American research (Kossek et al., 2016; De Menezes and Kelliher, 2017), the main reason for ineffective work-life management is that the line manager yields to the business pressure and power relations from the employer, marginalising employees' needs. As the quote from B7 indicates, the managerial informality can provide genuine 'humanised care' to employees only if the business situation and organisational, institutional environment allow the line manager to do so. However, when labour cost-effectiveness remains the primary concern in the Chinese workplace, humanised management is only paid lip service by managers, the same as at the organisational level.

Emotionally, I do wish that all my staff work happily and do not need to worry about their personal life. However, I am restricted by preconditions...only if the company policy and financial budgets support, and the business situation allows.

Any further support incompatible with these then, sorry, I only can show my empathy in words (B7).

Second, whether informality can be exercised in a beneficial way also depends on line managers' personal views and capabilities. Managers with a strong orientation to work may directly disagree with the concept of humanised management from the beginning. As is shown in the quote A1, some managers may perceive the “goodwill” delivered would affect an employee’s work execution and commitment - the construction of WLBC may weaken an employees' commitment to the performance. The idealism of paid work strengthens managerial concerns about employees' work rather than their WLB:

Still, some managers take a dim view of it (WLB), claiming offering work-life care would damage employees’ executive skills and leave a less committed impression (A1).

In addition, the line manager's understanding of gender identity also impacts employees' WLB. As traditional gender roles remain rooted in the Chinese workplace (Zhang et al., 2018), female employees with dependent care are more likely to get the policy and managerial attention. Nevertheless, where males remain dominant in the senior positions of Chinese organisations (Cook, 2015), some male managers are less likely to show empathy and grant informal support for “females' issues” compared to the female managers. This is articulated by an interviewee's (B6) narrative below.

Compared to female managers; some male managers do not understand family responsibility very well...I used to work with a male manager, and he said to me, ‘you cannot have an hour rest for breastfeeding.’ He could not understand, even though I claimed it is a national statutory requirement.

Overall, the WLB context constructed by organisational, managerial and collegial supports may facilitate employees’ WLB, with managerial informality playing a key role in work-life management in the Chinese workplace. However, managerial informality has

a double-edged effect on employees. On the one hand, the line manager can informally use discretion to flexibly and responsively react to any request that employees may have or unexpected problems that employees may need to accommodate. On the other, it is noted that the positive effect of the managerial informality on employees may be undermined by business pressures and the line manager's personal beliefs and capability in terms of work-life management. The next section provides a focus on the effect of WLBC for the organisation in terms of employees' job performance.

7.5.2 The effectiveness of work-life support for Chinese organisations

Employees' job performance means both work behaviour and outcomes that align with the strategic goals of the organisation (Armstrong, 2006). This section will examine the effect of the WLBC on Chinese organisations by assessing the inter-relationship between WLBC and employees' job performance. The inter-relationship is analysed statistically from the survey data. This is followed by the thematic analysis to explain the causality between different supports and employees' job performance.

7.5.2.1 The positive relationship between WLBC and job performance

Table 26 shows the WLB context is positively correlated with the employee's job performance. Referring to the previous findings, job performance is found correlated to WLBC but not WLBPPs. This echoes the Anglo-American findings (e.g. Eaton, 2003; Behson, 2005; De Menezes and Kelliher, 2017) that informal approaches to work-life management (e.g., managerial support) are more useful than formal arrangements (e.g., WLBPPs). They work better to accommodate work-life preferences, thereby potentially fostering more positive employees' attitudes and behavioural outcomes. This is particularly a case in the Chinese workplace where work-life management is largely

under-institutionalised, and most WLB solutions are reached informally with line management.

Table 26 Correlation statistics of work-life support and job performance (Survey data)

		Overall work-life support	Organisational support	Managerial support	Collegial support
Job performance	coefficient	.149*	.124*	.160**	.066
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.015	.029	.005	.248
	N	312	312	312	312
Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					

In terms of different supports used to construct a WLBC, positive correlations are found in the cases of organisational and managerial supports rather than collegial support. This finding corresponds to existing Anglo-American WLB research which argues that supportive organisation and managers are the situational determinants that put WLBPPs into effect, and which indirectly or directly lead to the improved work attitudes and behaviour (Greenhaus and Foley, 2007; Beaugard and Henry, 2009). Compared to managerial support, the correlation for organisational support is weaker. This may be attributed to the rhetoric - the value of humanised care. Where long working hours are the norm, and they consume employees' time and energy, this slogan of humanised care may appear somewhat illusionary and is less likely to provide timely and substantial help that affects employees' behaviour. Regarding collegial support, the generation of social exchange behaviour caused by any form of interpersonal helping is more likely to be direct to the colleague rather than reflecting on their work enhancement. In addition, the occurrence of interpersonal helping (e.g. temporary work cover) may still require approval and authorisation from the manager. Even if the reciprocal process occurs, it may be perceived as managerial support rather than collegial support. Further analysis of the reciprocal process between employees and their manager and organisation are identified in the following sub-section.

7.5.2.2 A double-edged employee-manager/organisation process

Reciprocal behaviour by employees is not a surprising phenomenon in the Chinese workplace. With care and understanding from the organisation, employees would feel engage with hard working and keep loyalty to the company in action. Even being asked to work overtime is perceived as reasonable and acceptable. As participant B6 comments:

When the organisation cares and understand staff's family responsibilities and personal needs, the staff would be very warm to this, and work harder and longer for the company. Even if staff are asked to work overtime at a busy point; no one would say no.

This statement demonstrates an exchange mechanism, with a social resource (organisational care) leading to into improved employees' attitudes (work commitment and loyalty) and behaviour (hard working and retention). Employees who perceive organisational support to existing would feel an obligation to respond in kind with such reciprocal attitudes and behaviour. In this way the reciprocity between manager and employee echoes social exchange theory. As is shown in the participant B1's quote, managerial care as a social resource can bring about employees' affective commitment (feel happy and ambitious) and thereby improve the work efficiency.

If the line manager cares about the staff, the staff tend to work happily and feel ambitious in their personal development, they would develop their potential at work and enhance their work efficiency.

Chinese employees' reciprocal behaviour could be deeply influenced by the paternalistic employment relationship. Cooke (2013:124) argues "China is a highly hierarchical society and people are conscious of their status in the social order." The Chinese supervisor-subordinate nexus embodies the paternalism including authority, hierarchy, care, obedience, loyalty and dependence. The typical quote below distinctively illustrates how paternalism is generally involved in the Chinese supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Both the Chinese manager and employees are educated by paternalistic values performing the reciprocal behaviour to the organisation. The manager needs to care for employees, and employees also care and obey the manager and are loyal to the company.

We train managers to have concern and care for their staff...meanwhile, our staff are educated to support their manager by thinking about the standpoint of the manager... be loyal to their manager and treat the company as home (B1)

This reciprocal behaviour tends to be reinforced by ‘Guanxi’, a powerful influence in the workplace supporting the maintenance of mutual benefits, harmony, and loyalty (Xian et al., 2017; Hwang, 1987), thereby promoting social exchange practice (Li, 2013). The following quote from participant A11 implicitly recognises how Guanxi can influence the distribution of managerial support in the Chinese workplace.

China, unlike western countries, is a networking society...a good superior-subordinate relationship would help to gain more resources and opportunities for employees’ career development and personal needs.

As Guanxi can be utilised to make HR-related decisions (Xian et al., 2017), the line manager could mobilise and leverage their authority and resources to support employees’ work and life needs. Employees who benefit from a good Guanxi tend to feel an obligation to reciprocate to the manager with work commitment and performance.

However, the problem is when the line managers show subjectivity and favouritism to certain employees, leading to an unfair distribution of resources. Employees who have established a close relationship with the line manager are more likely to access the managerial support. These privileged employees benefit, leaving potential problems for other employees. Consequently, as Beauregard (2014) argues, the perceived unfairness of work-life support can lead to counterproductive work attitudes and behaviours. Although the risk of workplace inequality entrenched in managerial informality does not

appear directly in the data, this research indirectly identifies important concerns about this issue. Workplace equality is highly valued by Chinese employees, often functioning as an intervening variable between job resources and work-related outcomes (Hu et al., 2013). As one of the typical quotes from participant B9 indicated “We call for fairness. What tortures Chinese employees is the unequal redistribution of welfare rather than scarcity of policies.” Since the right to support (welfare distribution) is largely exercised by the line manager, the issue of whether managerial informality can be executed in a professional, empathic and fair manner is vital for Chinese work-life management.

To conclude, this section examined the effectiveness of a WLBC constructed by organisational, managerial and collegial supports based upon both data sources. First, findings reveal the WLB context constructed by organisational, managerial and collegial support may facilitate employees' WLB, with the interview data highlighting the significant role of the line manager. Line managers could flexibly react to, and informally engage with, employees' work-life needs in distinct ways when needed and appropriate. It is noted that the positive effect of managerial informality may be determined by the manager's authority, empathic attitude and professional capabilities in terms of work-life management. Lacking any of these traits could undermine the role of managerial informality on employees' WLB. Secondly, concerning the effect of WLBC for the organisation, in addition to the colleagues, both organisational and managerial support may motivate employees to reciprocate with improved work attitudes and behaviours, therefore enhancing job performance. However, managerial informality involving subjectivism and favouritism may bring about the unequal distribution of work resources, especially in the Guanxi-dominated Chinese workplace, and this could lead to counterproductive work behaviours and resentment.

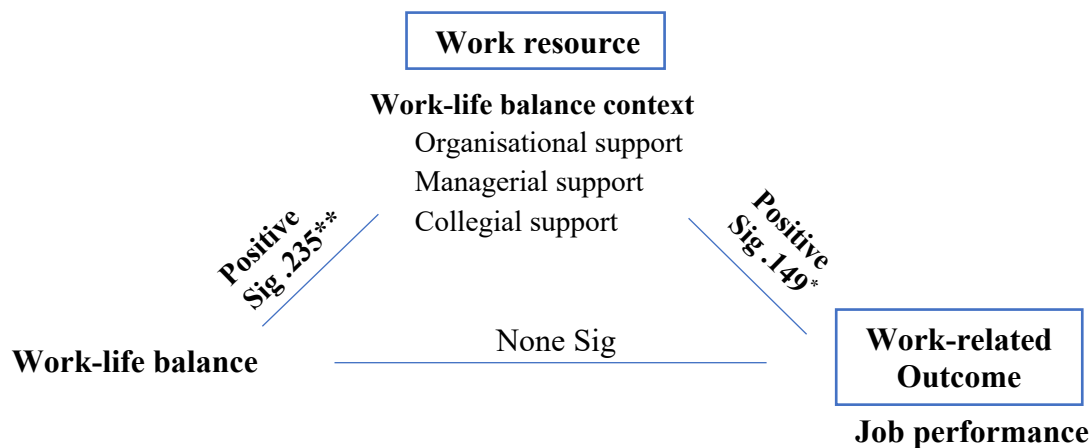
7.6 Summary of work-life balance context in Chinese organisations

This second part of the chapter critically examined the WLB context constructed within the Chinese case study organisations and its effect on employees' WLB and job performance based on triangulated data analysis. Since an understanding and the institutionalisation of WLBPPs remain under-developed, the issue of whether there are WLB contexts to direct work-life management, even informally, towards a supportive direction is of great importance. The findings show, to a certain degree, that a positive WLB context has been constructed and fostered at the organisational level (organisational culture and employer support) and departmental level (managerial support and collegial interpersonal helping). Organisational culture, all level of management and colleagues try to incorporate the (politically directed) values of 'humanised care' to construct a positive WLB context. At the organisational level, the advocacy of humanised values and emerging awareness of 'the business case' enable the employer to take work-life management into consideration, although humanised care may only be paid lip service to under the external market competition and internal performance pressures. At the department level, the mutual interactions between managers and colleagues may be conducive to fostering a positive WLB context. In particular, the role that the line manager plays appears to be the most significant.

This section then examines the effect of the WLB context on both employees and the organisations by identifying the inter-relationships between WLBC and WLB (part of Path 2), and job performance (part of Path 3) respectively. Both quantitative and qualitative findings to some extent indicate the positive links of both inter-relationships. As is shown in Figure 24 (below), the correlation statistics derived from survey data show WLBC is positively related to employees' WLB and job performance. Furthermore, the themes extracted from the interview data helped to explain the reasons for these two inter-

relationships. For employees, WLB can be facilitated by the perceived supports from the organisational level, managers and colleagues, among which, the role of managerial informality is significant. For the organisation, employees who perceived there to be positive organisational and managerial supports would be motivated to reciprocate through work behaviours – employees show their gratitude by working harder and performing better.

Figure 24 The inter-relationships between the work resource (WLB context), WLB and Job performance



Notably, given most WLB solutions are reached informally with line management, this section contributes by indicating the potentially double-edged effects of managerial informality on employees' WLB and job performance. Managerial informality can be a flexible and cost-effective approach that considers an individual's work-life needs and facilitates their WLB, therefore leading to reciprocal work behaviour. Problematically, under the business and performance pressures, and uncertain managerial approaches and capabilities, managerial informality may be conducted in an employer-friendly and unprofessional way, which stops employees perceiving work-life benefits. In addition, managerial informality could lead to inequality in the allocation of work resources, which, in turn, could lead to employees' counterproductive behaviour.

This findings section contributes to addressing the fourth research question that identifies and explores the Chinese WLB context and its effect on employees and organisations and examining path 2 and 3 regarding the WLB context within the theoretical framework. Findings derived from the data analysis echo the interpretations of the JD-R model and social exchange theory indicating that a positive WLB context can be a job resource that can have a beneficial effect on employees' WLB and job performance. However, the findings also reveal the barriers to, and risks that undermine, such beneficial effects, particularly in relation to managerial informality. Considering the dominance of managerial informality, its double-edged features in relation to work-life management and wider HRM will be further discussed in the next chapter.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined Chinese work-life management including the institutionalised formal approach (WLBPPs) and informal contextual approach (WLBC at the organisational level), through the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The findings contribute to answering the third and fourth research questions and examining two dimensions of the theoretical framework (Path 2 and 3). The findings contribute to (and critique) the Anglo-American dominated literature related to work-life management and indicate that workplace policy and WLB context are being influenced by distinct external and internal economic, institutional, and socio-cultural factors.

While the understanding and institutionalisation of WLBPPs are underdeveloped in Chinese organisations, there is an array of WLBPPs constituted from external legal regulations and political policies, and internal organisational policies and practices reflecting (primarily) legal compliance as well as the business case and social case. Their existence, however, is not equal in terms of availability and effectiveness. The survey

data revealed that WLBPPs are not significantly related to WLB outcomes. Drawing on Budd and Mumford (2006) and Daniels and French's (2006) research, both data sources indicated the problems facing Chinese employees when considering a positive effect from WLBPPs in the workplace. There are important gaps between the existence, availability, usage and effectiveness of WLBPPs, limiting the role of WLBPPs as a 'best practice' approach. These gaps are mainly caused by external legal and institutional ineffectiveness, market competition, organisations prioritising cost-effectiveness, rigid working patterns and managerial informality. Notably, the findings do not reject the link between WLBPPs and WLB assumed in the theoretical framework but highlight that the relationship is perceived to operate (WLBPPs are seen as a potential job resource) rather than perceived to exist. WLBPPs and actually support employees' WLB. In addition, while the positive relationship between WLBPPs and employees' job performance is statistically established, barriers arising from the external regulatory environment and internal management levels may block the beneficial link in practice.

Since the formal approaches to work-life management rarely exist and are not followed, Chinese employees get used to informal work-life management. The informal array of practices needs to be taken to effect in conjunction with the WLBC. Inspired by Kossek et al. (2010) and Dickers et al.'s (2007) research, the WLBC constructed by the organisation, and managerial and collegial behaviour may provide supports at the organisational and department level, particularly if influenced by business case arguments and political and social expectation. Furthermore, both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate the positive links between WLBC and WLB, and job performance. However, caution is required about concluding that the WLB context offers the best contextual supports in terms of work-life management. At the organisational level, being

jeopardised by business and performance pressures, organisational support may be delivered as rhetoric rather than substantively. At the department level, most WLB solutions are reached informally with line management. Managerial informality can be a double-edged sword that shapes a lived experience of WLB through both flexibility and intensification in the Chinese workplace. The managerial informality can become a flexible and cost-effective approach that considers an individual's work-life needs and facilitates their WLB, leading to reciprocal work behaviour. Problematically, managerial informality which only supports employer-friendly outcomes, or which is undertaken in an unprofessional manner may marginalise employees' WLB and even lead to counterproductive work behaviour. In addition, while the collegial support is not shown (statistically) to benefit employees' performance, it can act as an interpersonal helper to facilitate employees' WLB.

Overall, this finding chapter addressed the research questions and critically examined the theoretical framework (path 2 and 3). It contributed to the thesis by critiquing the best practice WLBPPs identified in Anglo-American research and demonstrating that most WLB solutions are reached informally with line management in the case study organisations. The findings also highlight the double-edged effect of managerial informality in influencing employees' WLB and organisational development. In addition, the findings also indicate that work-life management needs to be contextualised as the discourse of WLB is deeply embedded in the Chinese national and organisational context. Therefore, the next chapter considers the findings reported in chapters 6 and 7 in relation to wider WLB and HRM debates.

Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion

8.0 Introduction

This chapter concludes the thesis, highlighting the significance of the main and the contribution of the research. The aim of this research project was to examine Chinese employees' perceptions and experience of work-life balance and the relationship between management's formal application of WLB policies and practices, and the reality experienced by the employee. To achieve these aims, this research constructed a conceptual framework of WLB to scope the meaning of WLB and a deductive theoretical framework to examine WLB issues in relation to the work demands and resources, and work-related outcomes. Following the development of these two frameworks, the research context was explored, focusing on how the national and organisational context in China constructs and shapes employees' perceptions and experiences and organisational work-life management practices. The aim of this approach was to identify research gaps and refine the research questions to account for the Chinese context. Based on these three foundation chapters, the research was designed to utilise a mixed methodological approach, to collect multiple data sources for analysis, with the aim of addressing research questions and validating the research frameworks. Given that, this chapter contributes by first, highlighting the main findings related to employees' perceptions of WLB and the work-life management approaches in the Chinese case study organisations; secondly, critically reviewing the research frameworks in light of research conducted in Chinese workplaces; and thirdly, concluding the thesis by identifying the theoretical and methodological contributions and practical implications, as well as some areas for further research.

This chapter begins with section 8.1, a summary and discussion of the research findings. The first part of this section (8.1.1) discusses the relevance of the findings related to Chinese employees' perceptions of WLB presented in chapter 6, addressing the first and second research questions. This is followed by a discussion on critically understanding WLB in the Chinese context. The second part (section 8.1.2) discusses the findings related to the formal and informal approaches to work-life management in Chinese organisations presented in chapter 7, to address the third and fourth questions. Then, work-life management is critically discussed in terms of HRM strategy and implementation within Chinese organisations. Further, the contributions of the research and its implications for work-life and HRM literature, methodology, and political and managerial practices are outlined in section 8.2. While a range of contributions are highlighted, there remain limitations to the research and potential areas for further research. The research limitations and recommendations are presented respectively in sections 8.3 and 8.4. Last but not least, section 8.5 provides a final conclusion of the thesis.

8.1 Research summary and discussion

8.1.1 Understanding work-life balance in the Chinese context

With China's rapid economic and social transformation over the past four decades, Chinese employees' perceptions and experiences of WLB are driven and shaped by external shifts and developments. In Chapter 6, Chinese employees' WLB perceptions and experience were identified and examined. Chinese employees have an increased awareness of the importance of WLB, but their understanding of WLB remains vague and varied. First, drawing on the multi-layered conceptual framework of WLB, the research findings addressed the first question that Chinese employees tend to embrace a work-life integration and enrichment, and that they perceive themselves to possess a

relatively balanced work-life experience. Secondly, the findings address the second research question that examines the negative links between dominant work demands (i.e. working hours and workload) and employees' WLB (path 1); as well as the inter-relationship between employees' WLB and their job performance, which is found to be statistically insignificant (path 4). Notably, a contradiction appears whereby employees may experience a poor WLB due to long working hours, work intensification, and formal work-life support, but they perceive themselves to have a relative positive WLB in the sense of work-life integration and enrichment. Consequently, it is appropriate to explore this apparent contradiction and critically assess the meaning of WLB in China in depth. This discussion will contribute to revealing the extent to which work-life issues in the context of China reflect the general trends in WLB research or require a specific interpretation of WLB.

8.1.1.1 Work-life integration and enrichment

The findings presented in chapter 6 revealed that Chinese employees tend to believe there is positive work-life relationship from the perspectives of integration and enrichment. WLB is a complex and dynamic concept; there are multi-layered factors at national, organisational and individual levels that contribute to shaping people's perceptions of WLB. From the individual perspective, although perceptions can shift according to the personal socio-demographics, and vary between individuals, most of the Chinese employees participating in the research tended to believe that work and life can be integrated and enriched. Work can offer financial rewards, developmental opportunities and legitimacy for their life. Chinese employees tend, therefore, to prioritise work and become accustomed to the domination of work, despite having increasing expectations around WLB. However, as Lewis et al. (2007) argue, an individual's WLB perceptions

and priorities may not be their personal choices, since the formation of work-life integration and enrichment is socially-constructed, with organisational and national contexts playing important roles.

At the organisational level, diversified work demands and resources can have direct and significant impacts on employees' WLB perceptions. Since the work resources directly related to employees' work and life issues may be less available in the Chinese workplace, work demands are the key to the formation of employees' WLB perceptions. Such organisational priorities, such as cost-minimisation, high-performance work systems and a long working norm have been increasing work demands, thereby leaving little substantial consideration for employees' WLB. Thus, under the unequal employment relationship, employees have no choice but to allow work to integrate with (further impose on) life to secure life enrichment. In the national context, economic, institutional and social-cultural factors work to shape employees' perceptions towards integration and enrichment both positively and negatively. Macroeconomic developments, increasingly sound legal and institutional systems, political advocacy and socio-cultural provide opportunities to, and heighten expectations around, securing work, promotion and improved living standards. Negatively, the pressures of business and labour markets, institutional barriers, and cultural rhetoric, force employees to become accustomed to tolerating the domination of work as a key element of work-life integration and enrichment.

The integration perspective critiques the 'false dichotomy of work and life' and highlights the synergy and connection between work and personal life (Bloom, 2016; Lewis and Cooper, 2005). As the meaningfulness of work is stressed, the scope of work is extended,

and work involvement comes to dominate, work becomes the path to life's essentials and quality. The material and spiritual gains from work may be the mechanism that can offset the negative effects of work and achieve psychological enrichment. This perspective is resonant with the developed enrichment model (Greenhaus and Powell, 2009). Unlike the traditional conflict models which assume that work is bad, or a burden and life is good, the enrichment model suggests employees can accumulate various resources to contribute to work-life enrichment. These two perspectives have been identified to help explain the meaning of WLB in China mostly, though mainly from a cultural perspective (e.g. Ling and Powell, 2000; Lu et al., 2010; Spector et al., 2007). It is argued that in collectivistic societies, typically China, the value of harmony, as is frequently mentioned by the participants, may closely tie their work and life together. Work tends to be viewed as a way of supporting and advancing the family life; the conflict (disharmony) may be self-digested as an unavoidable byproduct of promoting stability and improvements for both the family and life.

Different from this interpretation from a cultural perspective, this research argues that culture should not be given predominance to explain the perspectives of work-life integration and enrichment in China. Combining paid work and other life roles is a common phenomenon across human society. While cultural factors have an effect on people's values and behaviour in relation to work and life, universal social recognition and values mostly ascribe an employee to paid work, as opposed to care, home commitments, leisure, community or social activities. The value and symbolic capitals of paid work can drive productivity and growth over family, caring and individual well-being. Only if the material basis is assured from financial incomes, can an individual's family responsibility and life quality be feasibly afforded. In particular, the increasing

cost of life essentials in China, such as housing, medical and educational expenses, on the one hand, spurs Chinese people's expectations for a better life; on the other, prepares them to endure difficult work-life demands (Xiao and Cooke, 2012). When an individual's personal and family resources do not satisfy the need for better-life prospects, "work to live" with a hardworking ethos seems to be an essential choice. This argument does not fully deny the culture-sensitive perspective (Powell et al., 2009) but indicates its one-sidedness. Cultural factors can shape employees' perception of WLB on the surface, but the nature of work and life is more likely determined by economic and social forces, which lay an essential economic basis and life wellbeing for individuals.

Notably, linking work and life together through culture may be problematic. It is stated that Chinese cultural values such as "harmony" and "self-dedication" are used to educate Chinese employees in terms of work ethic and accepting the unavoidable conflicts resulting from work domination. Can Chinese employees' "mindfulness" developed from cultural teaching be sufficient, by itself, to relieve their work-life conflicts? This question will be addressed in the next section, where it is argued Chinese employees have a superficial but unsustainable WLB.

8.1.1.2 Superficial and unsustainable work-life balance

Given the positive perceptions of Chinese employees reported in the finding chapters, it is perhaps not surprising that Chinese employees perceive themselves to possess a relatively satisfying WLB. Despite that, the relatively positive WLB picture cannot hide the issues employees are experiencing in the workplace: long working hours and work intensification, few institutionalised work-life rights and employer-focused temporal flexibility. These aspects may lead to a range of work demands that erode employees'

personal lives, and which critically challenge the reported balance. As is proposed by the JDR model, heavy demands and insufficient resources at work are not conducive to employees' WLB. Namely, since the work-life perceptions and experiences appear contradictory, it seems difficult to provide an explicitly optimistic interpretation of Chinese employees' WLB experience.

This research argues that Chinese employees suffer irreconcilable work-life tension behind the picture promoted of balance. The WLB perceived by employees may rather reflect a helpless tolerance rather than a satisfied balance. Irreconcilable work-life tensions may not necessarily be neutralised by cultural influences; tolerance may not merely be a cultural phenomenon but the by-product of an intensified labour process under the market economy, the power inequality in the employment relationship, and traditional gendered roles of labour divisions. These are elaborated as follows:

First, the intensified labour process under the market economy increases the domination of work. The rapid marketisation of China not only offers employees' opportunities to achieve work-life enrichment but also leads to potential work-life challenges. Following unprecedented economic development and employment growth under marketisation, jobs became more abundant and better paid (Cooke, 2005); people's material life has been gradually improved, with few working people in severe poverty. However, heightened business and labour market competitions drive the pressures felt by every type of employee. In order to seek a better life, employees either voluntarily or involuntarily prolong their working hours, take on extra workload, work on-call, and give up work-life entitlements to obtain relatively high human capital returns in terms of pay and career

development. Accordingly, people's lives are primarily occupied by work, enabling them to fall into the state of work-life imbalance.

Is this imbalance caused by the individual's choice? Probably not; ineffective workload management, the utilisation of temporal flexibility mediated by technology and communication, and performance-related pay systems promote long working hours and ongoing exhaustion, challenging Chinese employees' WLB. This is a common phenomenon in the contemporary global labour market under the logic of the intensified labour process. Business pressures are transmitted to employees throughout the managerial hierarchy, leaving them working in time- and energy-poverty. Chinese WLB issues are significantly driven by the economic dimension, which reflect the work-life issues observed in Anglo-American and European contexts (White et al., 2003; Hyman et al., 2003).

Chinese employees tend to show more discretionary effort and raise fewer complaints when accepting a work-life imbalance. Rather than merely explaining this by cultural factors, this is due to the influence of both marketisation and traditional culture (Xiao and Cooke, 2012), and the role of marketisation is argued to be the key in this research. With the market economy, the traditional cultural values such as work ethic, self-sacrifice and dedication for the community is combined with the capital logic and embedded into organisational culture and employment relations. For example, any family issues and personal emergencies are commonly seen as "unprofessional" and "disengagement". Therefore, for most employees, a more pragmatic coping strategy to address long working hours, work intensification and employer-friendly flexibility is "tolerance" and "get used to it" in order to secure their current employment and income and, if possible, gain further

rewards and promotion. This may generate a rhetorical “workplace harmony” and a psychological WLB, but it masks the nature of the labour process. Critically, it is argued that such a “harmony” is not aligned with the political and social promotion of a harmonious workplace. When associated with the intensified labour process under the market economy, cultural values may act as a barrier to employees securing respite at the organisational level, as recent US and European research has also argued (Foucreault et al., 2018).

Secondly, power inequality in the employment relationship reinforces the work-life imbalance. The employer expects their employees to prioritise work while employees attempt to secure (some of) their time and energy for life outside of work as much as possible. The employer uses their prerogative to determine and control the work demands in terms of time, intensity and flexibility, while employees appear to be vulnerable in negotiating resources for their non-work domain. The nature of employment relations enables work-life imbalance to become rooted in the Chinese workplace, regardless of the recent approach to secure a harmonious ideology of Chinese employment relationships.

Chinese employment relationships embrace harmony and loyalty, treating the workplace as an extended family. Managers are expected to nurture and protect their employees (Pellegrini et al., 2010; Danford and Zhao, 2012). Consequently, Chinese employees, are keen to form closer relationships with their line managers than is the case in the Anglo-American workplace (Chen, 2001; Russel and Ross, 2008). In terms of reciprocity, employees commit to their work, and in turn, they wish their organisations and managers to look after them. As the findings of this study show (Path 3), an effective social

exchange mechanism is conducive to fostering a harmonious work-life environment, which may lead to mutual benefits. However, it is argued, the ‘harmonious project’ has yet to become a reality in the Chinese workplace. The cultural rhetoric is too weak to withstand the nature of employment relations: the power asymmetry between employer and employee creates a win-lose situation where the use of human capital tends to be commodified rather than capitalised. As Danford and Zhao (2012) argue, it is precisely the interest dissonance between the employer and employee, rather than cultural harmony, which potentially effects employees’ broader perceptions of work. Consequently, employees tend to compromise and then allow work to occupy their life.

What is worse, the power imbalance within the employment relationship is reinforced due to a lack of legislation and its institutionalisation, and ineffective policy implementation in the Chinese workplace. Legal and institutional systems can mandatorily safeguard employees’ work-life rights to a large extent (e.g. Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017; Lu, 2016). While the development of China’s labour law and provision protects employees’ rights in terms of work and leave, it is not sufficient to fully secure employees’ work-life rights and benefits. Problems, not only with the relative lack of legislation but crucially with ineffective enforcement, provide the employer and management scope to adopt “countermeasures” to meet business demands and marginalise employees’ work-life needs. In addition, without interventions from an independent union and collective bargaining, Chinese employees are less able to voice their discontent at their work-life imbalance.

Thirdly, Chinese work-life tension remains severe through the lens of gender. In response to the critique of gender-neutral WLB (Lewis et al., 2007), it is found that WLB remains

a gendered topic in China in terms of the household division of labour and policy perspectives. While work-life issues pertain to both women and men in China (Lu, 2015), the findings of this research indicate that neither the high proportion of female employment nor attempts to equalize the household division of labour have swayed the conventional “gender order” in Chinese society. Both male and female employees tend to take on a similar amount of work and responsibility, but female employees, as the traditional carer at home, still bear the majority of household labour (Choi, 2008; Coffey et al., 2009; Ling and Powell, 2001). Thus, Chinese female employees, especially managers, are more likely to suffer a higher level of imbalance.

On the other hand, the gender-related policies are problematic in policy making and implementation, leaving limited benefits for employees’ WLB. First, the policies are inclined to female protection in design, which largely marginalises males’ work-life rights (Bardoel et al., 2008). For example, unlike the legitimised and mandatory maternity leave, paternity leave is only promulgated at the regional policy level, leaving the “countermeasure” room for the employer and manager to play (i.e. link paternity pay with performance-related pay). Male employees often “voluntarily” give up the leave to secure performance-pay. If there is a failure for the father to be entitled to the basic right to share their household division of labour, by no means can the equality of gender labour division be achieved. Likewise, female employees do not fully benefit from the policy dividend they should have been given. The mal-legal implementations (e.g. breastfeeding leave cancellation) and practices (e.g. queues for baby births) can challenge the legal mandatory and constrain female employees’ work-life rights.

To summarise, China is still in a developing stage; the economic and social-cultural factors have several double-edged effects on employees' work-life perceptions and experiences. Chinese employees report a relatively positive WLB but may not escape from the sharp work-life collisions between: the employee's ever-growing needs for a better life and the logic of productivity orientation under the market economy; employees' ever-growing needs for better work and the power differentials of the employment relationship; and employees' ever-growing needs for gender equality and the rooted gendered labour division. Employees, as a passive recipient of the organisation and managers, have to internalise their ever-growing needs for a better quality of work and life and sacrifice their personal life to some extent, allowing work to occupy their life. It is noted in the discussion that although some 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), this sense of balance appears a rhetorical response. The superficial and unsustainable WLB Chinese employees experience reflects the generic nature of work and lived work-life experiences in the context of the globalising market economy. Despite the extant SOE status of the two case organisations, the systems of management control and the prevailing high-performance work systems were replicating in important respects, the labour processes seen in the privately owned enterprises and MNCs in contemporary China (Danford and Zhao, 2012). It may be possible to apply the findings to the broader workforce in the globalising market economy, notwithstanding the particular relevance of the Chinese context.

An unsustainable WLB appears universal and is an overarching risk to the workforce and society. In response to that, employment policies and HR practices need to be sufficiently sensitive and effective to meet employees' WLB issues. Boxall (2007) argues the goal of

HRM lies in stabilising a cost-effective and socially sustainable way of people management. Managing employees' WLB, therefore, can be argued to be one of the important tasks and future directions for advancing the HRM goal in respect of both the viability and sustained advantage. Subsequently, this chapter will discuss Chinese work-life management in terms of HRM strategy and implementation.

8.1.2 Exploring work-life management within Chinese HRM

A meaningful WLB may be unsustainable given the domination of work that employees experience, which could create a far-reaching risk on their well-being and, thus, on organisational sustainability. Taking an optimistic stance, the focus of Chinese development is now to construct a harmonious society and progress toward prosperity and the happiness of people's livelihoods (19th CPC National Congress report, 2017), so that employees' work and life quality are being highlighted. Issues related to employees' WLB have been entering public discourse and placed on the political agenda. Employment policy and HR practice are being encouraged to be more sensitive to employees and to respond to employees' work-life rights and needs. However, it is unclear whether, or to what extent, Chinese HRM is focusing attention on employees' WLB. Based on the research findings presented in chapter 7, this section aims to discuss work-life management within Chinese HRM in terms of strategy and implementation.

Chapter 7 identified and examined formal and informal approaches to work-life management within Chinese HRM involving the composition, availability and effectiveness of WLBPPs and the WLB context. These findings contribute to addressing the third and fourth research questions and examining part of the theoretical framework (Path 2 and 3). It is noted that Chinese employees' WLB is rarely considered at the

strategic HRM level. While the top-down political ideology of ‘harmony’ seems to promote humanised management, it is difficult to challenge the prevalent HR policies and practices operating under high-performance/commitment work systems. Since formal approaches to work-life management rarely exist and are not followed, most WLB arrangements are reached informally with line management within the daily management of the workplace, which, it is argued, can be seen as a double-edged sword in influencing employees' WLB and organisational development. Since Chinese work-life management needs to be contextualised, as the discourse of WLB is deeply embedded in the Chinese national and organisational context, this section will also consider the extent to which the research findings can be generalised, and aligned with Anglo-American research, or reflect a distinctive set of WLB arrangements.

8.1.2.1 Lack of formal work-life management at the strategic level

In Anglo-American literature, the strategic importance of WLB issues is argued from the mutual gain perspective. Work-life management can reconcile the business case and social case for organisations and employees (Guest, 2017). In terms of the business case, work-life management achieves both higher levels of employee satisfaction and improved performance, recruitment and retention. From the social case perspective, it is adopted for employees' wellbeing and to reflect an organisation's social responsibility (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). As Cooke (2009b:23) states “Chinese companies are becoming more strategic in managing their workforce”; drawing on the mutual gains perspective, so it might be possible to develop work-life management approaches at the strategic level in China.

The potential for strategically developing Chinese work-life management may arise from a combination of western HRM learning and the current advocacy in Chinese politics for

harmonious employment. It is argued that Chinese organisations have been moving away from traditional personnel management and learning western HRM practices and making these fit into the Chinese context (Rowley and Cooke, 2014). An increasing number of Chinese organisations, especially large organisations, attempt to establish HRM at the strategic level by aligning the daily HRM practices with firm performance (Jiang et al., 2012; Paauwe et al., 2013). Chinese organisations learn from successful western HRM and mainly replicate these management techniques to improve organisational performance and attract, retain and develop human capital. The application of high-performance work systems is a typical case. However, contextual and contingent factors are significant and Chinese HRM appears to be on a hybrid route that not only learns from, but also contextualises, western HRM policy and practices (Warner, 2009). Given that, work-life management could be one of the strategies to be adopted, including the design of WLBPPs and the construction of a positive WLBC.

Through the objective of constructing a “harmonious society”, political forces may drive Chinese work-life management on the basis of the social case. As Cooke (2018: 5) suggests, “When interpreting HRM issues in the Asian context, political ideology underpins the top-down institutional environment, for example, political ideology affects the social welfare system and equality policy that may be reflected in HRM policy and practice at the organisational level.” In China, Confucianism is an important legitimising ideology utilised by the CPC. It is potentially applied to undermine dissonance in employment relations by emphasising harmony as a social virtue (Danford and Zhao, 2012). Given that, the organisation must not only value (prioritise) business development but also take responsibility for fostering a harmonious workplace. As Warner and Zhu (2010) found, all organisations, across a variety of ownership forms, attempt to apply

corporate actions to contribute to the construction of the “harmonious society”. Consequently, work-life management appears to be one of the corporate actions that could reconcile the conflict existing in employees’ work and life, and which contribute to the brand image of the harmonious employment relationship in response to political demands.

Nevertheless, this research focuses on the difficulties arising from attempts to incorporate WLB into strategic HRM. The formalisation of work-life management faces barriers, irrespective of the institutional, business and social case. First, under the current legal regulation and political provision, organisations are less likely to design and develop the western style flexible working arrangements within the rigid conventions of work practices (e.g. full-time working pattern). Even though WLBPPs (e.g. working hours regulations, leave entitlement and social security benefits established at the legal and political level and fragmented welfare initiatives at the organisational level) can contribute to safeguarding employees’ work-life rights and offering some work-life benefits, their implementation is problematic as assessed by their availability, usage, and effectiveness, as has been theoretically and empirically found in Anglo-American research (e.g. Budd and Momford, 2006; Daniels and French, 2006; Sanchez-Vidal, 2012; French, 2014). Business and performance pressures, as well as managerial control reinforce the domination of work in terms of the long and voluntary working hours and work intensification, marginalising employees’ work-life rights and benefits in the Chinese workplace.

Secondly, formalising work-life management based on the social case is also beset with difficulties. Facilitating people’s WLB can be a form of CSR fulfilment that responds to

the Chinese political and social callings for “construction of a harmonious society”. Hence, WLB can be internally developed as one of the widely advocated humanised values being embedded in the Chinese organisational culture. However, organisational culture tends to be aligned primarily with the business strategy. Denison et al., (2011) reviewed studies of Chinese organisational culture and summarised that the cultural patterns of Chinese companies is not systematic, particularly for SOEs. The overarching culture of SOEs is one of the transitions towards being more self-directed and market-focused. With marketisation, business pressures and management control, the employees and managers interviewed reacted with skepticism to the notion of their employer’s commitment of humanised care, regarding it as management paying lip service to the construction of harmony. Given that, the "social case" can be argued to be harmonious rhetoric and fantasy, which is too challenging to be transformed into formal organisational policies or practice.

Last but not least, the promotion of work-life management remains at odds with business strategies which focus on profitability and cost-effectiveness. Aligning with the business strategy, mainstream HRM focuses on employees’ performance. The research data failed to establish a positive link between employees’ WLB and job performance. This is similar to arguments in Anglo-American research, where Guest (2017) highlights the problems of paying strategic attention to employees’ WLB. He argues the main reason for this is the lack of evidence which can directly reflect the enhancement of employee well-being (e.g. WLB) from HRM. Furthermore, the scarcity of employees’ voice on WLB issues significantly weakens the possibility of raising work-life management issues at the strategic level. As Taylor et al. (2003: 452) state “given the strategic importance of targets...relaxation is deemed non-negotiable”. Likewise, this is embodied in the Chinese

workplace where WLB can be seen as equivalent to "relaxation". Long working hours, being on call and a hard-working ethic are the qualities of ideal or effective employees, which serve strategic organizational goals. This reflects the previous discussion where, it is argued, most Chinese employees who work in such a performance-oriented workplace get used to working hard and performing well, achieving a level of psychological satisfaction mediated by material or career benefits, regardless of the work-life tensions.

8.1.2.2 Fully embedded informal work-life management at the implementation level

Since Chinese employees' WLB is rarely considered in organisational strategy, most WLB solutions are reached informally with line management. Weber's (1978) work on formal versus substantive rationality can be utilised to explain the prevalence of informal work-life management in the Chinese workplace. Formal rationality refers to the formal operation of rules and procedures. Managerial decisions are made through established HR practices impersonally applied to all (Zhang and Morris, 2014). Substantive rationality covers managers who are able and willing to make decisions informally based upon a contingent situation. As very few systematical and formalised WLBPPs are used to guide Chinese managers dealing with employees' WLB issues, substantive rationality is prevalent in day-to-day management. Arguably, the managerial informality is an issue in terms of the wider context of HR management, rather than merely the field of work-life management; it may not only be a Chinese phenomenon but affects other national and cultural contexts.

Increasingly, research has highlighted the informal negotiation of work-life arrangements between the employee and managers (Eaton, 2003; Gregory and Millner, 2009; De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011/ 2017). This applies equally to research conducted in Anglo-

American societies even though formal work-life management has been established. The burgeoning attention on informal approaches highlights two main advantages. First, employees may be able to accommodate personal work-life needs and circumstances to a greater degree through informal arrangements than through relatively bureaucratic and lengthy formal processes. Further, employees may feel an obligation to reciprocate through higher levels of performance to repay the line manager that offered them beneficial arrangements and, through this, the organisation can benefit (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2017). Chinese employees in this research put forward similar views, appreciating an informal approach to managing their WLB.

Both Chinese managers and employees tend to accept informality to address individuals' work-life issues on a "case-by-case" basis. The survey findings show the WLBC is positively related to employees' WLB and job performance; the interview findings demonstrate that informal work-life management is perceived as a cost-effective and flexible way of responding to both business and employees' needs. Given the heterogeneity of work content and the fast-moving market environment, line managers are able to respond to employees' requests and to deal with employees' WLB issues in a flexible, prompt and economic manner. It is observed from the findings that, for managers, the informal approach avoids the financial costs and resultant administrative burden associated with formal WLBPPs. In addition, where the informal approach is perceived by an employee as a managerial favour, this can stimulate the employee's performance at work as a means of reciprocating the favour.

Chinese employees are also found to appreciate informal management to some extent because it can better accommodate their work-life preferences and attenuate the pressure

associated with procedural formalisation. As Zhang and Morris (2014:71) state "Chinese people are more used to relying on people's judgment and interactions than on regulations." Even when there is some guidance over formal approaches, such as with leave entitlement, informal arrangements are still incorporated into the practical implementation of the policy (ibid.). However, informality is found to be moderated by the social relationship, and interaction, between the manager and employee. Where there is a good quality of Guanxi between them, there is a greater possibility of securing work-life benefits through managerial care and mutual understanding. Through positive social interactions with managers, employees are more likely to feel relieved from some of their work-life tensions. Although the scope of a manager's discretion will not necessarily address employees' work-life needs, given the constraints imposed by rigid working patterns and senior management, employees' may feel that the manager has personally made efforts to accommodate their work-life needs (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2017).

These research findings resonate with the Anglo-American research that argue informal approaches may lead to high levels of satisfaction among employers and employees (e.g. ibid.; Eaton, 2003). With informal approaches, employees are more able to participate in their personal and professional lives and improve their WLB, which may, in turn, generate reciprocal behaviours (e.g. working hard and performing better) for their organisations. In this sense, Chinese work-life management, mostly embedded in managerial informality, may be a "best practice" accepted by the manager and employees.

However, despite its acceptance, this does not mean the informal approach is unproblematic. It is argued in this research that informal work-life management may have a detrimental impact on both employees and the organisation. Although the Chinese

organisation embraces harmony into employment relations, and the paternalistic manager feels obliged to care for employees' WLB issues, business responsibilities are frequently given priority over the political and social responsibilities. Hence, the Chinese workplace, in essence, embodies a performance-oriented rather than harmony-constructed environment in practice. Given that, employees' work-life rights and benefits may suffer while the organisation blindly pursues business profits. The following section highlights, in depth, the problems associated with informal work-life management in the Chinese workplace.

First, managerial informality may challenge the authority of legislation and regulatory enforcement. The case organisations are SOEs which are known to be examples of regulatory enforcement, political compliance and corporate social responsibility in the labour market (Cooke, 2005). They strictly follow the legal regulations and actively respond to political advocacy of CPC and the government. However, with the process of marketisation, these employers increasingly have autonomy to exercise organisational "countermeasures" to minimise potential disadvantages arising from external regulation, so that regulations and policy enforcement are weakened.

The research findings indicate that internal countermeasures, as a manifestation of informality, are used in the Chinese workplace. The legally underpinned annual leave entitlement being commodified is a typical example. The employer implements annual leave requirements but links the policy with performance-related pay and future promotion. Fearing pay cuts and potential career consequences, the majority of employees tend to 'voluntarily' give up the leave entitlement or work longer hours to compensate for taking leave. Since taking leave would increase their personal costs to

some extent, it may be a reasonable choice for employees not facing a personal emergency to sacrifice their leave or do additional overtime in the name of carrying forward cultural virtues, and a hardworking ethos. Indeed, the employer seems to utilise informality. The leave-pay link significantly reinforces employees' overworking behaviours and indirectly shapes employees' expectations in respect of WLB. Consequently, employees' work-life rights are marginalised, and the all-pervasive intrusion work and potential career risks work to limit WLBPPs from playing an effective role in work-life management.

Secondly, business demands and long working hours norms may significantly undermine the positive aspects of managerial informality at the line management level. Chinese large organisations have been transiting from the hierarchical to flatter organisational structures, and from bureaucratic to empowering management style to enhance organisational efficiency (ibid.), but discretion, giving authorisation to line management, is conditional. As is shown in the findings, line managers are pressurised to prioritise productivity and employee performance over the employee's needs. They are often unable to offer substantial work-life support by controlling the timing, intensity and flexibility of work or through approving leave. In most cases, humanised management is limited to 'verbal empathy'.

While employees are aware of this and do show an understanding attitude towards their managers, this "understanding" is more like a helpless compromise in the face of the employer's power. As the vulnerable party within the employment relations, the employee is effectively forced to bear the demanding nature of work, trading job security and income for greater effort and at some personal cost, in terms of stress and quality of

life. Guest (2002b) argues this can be invisible exploitation. Accordingly, through tolerating work intensification and immersed in cultural rhetoric, the marginalisation of work-life rights and benefits becomes acceptable, explained away as “mutual understanding” and “reciprocal commitments” between manager and employee.

Thirdly, the managerial informality may leave room for managers to exercise subjectivity and favouritism, which may lead to the unfair distribution of WLB resources and even discrimination between employees. Chinese employees highly value workplace equality, which is often described as an intervening variable between job resources and work-related outcomes (Hu et al., 2013). If work-life benefits (only) accrue to specific employee groups, organisational justice may be challenged, disengaging employees and affecting performance. Notably, this risk may be reinforced in the Chinese workplace under the influence of Guanxi. Employees who have abundant Guanxi with the managers tend to be treated more favourably by these informal arrangements, accessing the available work resources (e.g. work autonomy and personal support) (Xian et al., 2017; Chen, 2001). The remaining employees may be excluded from accessing these resources and perceive the operation of the organization to be unfair. Furthermore, workplace inequality may further contribute to discrimination. The excluded employees may respond to the unfair resource distribution with “counterproductive” work attitudes and behaviours (Beauregard, 2014). It also can negatively impact on workplace harmony and potentially jeopardise sustainable social development in the long run. By contrast, the managerial informality could provide genuine work-life resources required to increase employees’ gratitude and dedication if it is conducted in an employee-friendly and fair sense.

Overall, the informal approaches controlled by managerial informality lie at the centre of work-life management. The Chinese employer may informalise WLB in the workplace through “countermeasures” to abide by the law and provision on the surface but reduce the scope of employees to secure their work-life rights. The line manager may deal with employees’ work-life issues in an ad hoc way, prioritising workplace cost-effectiveness, such that the humanised management and harmonious employment relations are primarily rhetoric. In the short-term, employees and organisations may, however, be content with the results of informal approaches, namely where an employee’s one-off work-life issue is tackled, and the resultant reciprocal behaviour by the employer is profitable to the organisation. While the detrimental consequences of informal arrangements may be overlooked, managerial informality may be conducted in an employee-unfriendly manner and lead to unequal outcomes which may, in the long term, damage employees’ wellbeing as well as organisational sustainability.

In general, Anglo-American WLB research and practice have accumulated precious experience in facilitating employees’ WLB in terms of formalised WLBPPs and a supportive WLBC. However, in China, the discourse and agenda for work-life management remains limited: formal WLBPPs are not strategically designed and are largely ineffective in the workplace; in most cases, Chinese employers and managers’ informally steer employees’ work-life perceptions and experiences.

In the light of this discussion, it is argued, based upon this research that informal approaches to work-life management can be a double-edged sword; even though they appear to be accepted by employees and managers as a flexible, and cost-effective approach. However, the managerial informality is to a large extent associated with

employer-friendly flexibility and raises risks of workplace inequality and discriminatory practice. It is argued that these research findings and resultant discussions of Chinese employees' WLB make a range of theoretical and practical contributions to the study of WLB and HRM fields, which will be highlighted in the following section.

8.2 Research contributions and implications

8.2.1 Research contributions

Given the potential disconnection between western and non-western work-life studies, this research sought to gain a robust understanding of WLB by constructing a deductive conceptual and theoretical frameworks and conducting mixed methodological fieldwork in a case study located within the world's second largest economy and largest labour market, China. It is argued that this is a pioneering WLB research. It examines not only employees' perceptions and experiences of WLB but also the formal and informal approaches to work-life management in the Chinese workplace. The research uses China to test Anglo-American models and theories and assess the extent to which Anglo-American work-life management practices are influential in China. This responds to the call for more work-life/family research in non-western contexts and emerging economies (e.g. Chandra, 2012; Xiao and Cooke, 2012; Lu and Cooper, 2015). While the research participants are primarily white-collar employees working in two SOEs in the pharmaceutical sector, the results may shed light on the situation facing employees in the workplace more broadly. The contribution of the research will be outlined in the next three sub-sections in terms of work-life research, HRM literature, and methodology.

8.2.1.1 Contribution to Work-life research

First, it is argued that the research empirically validates the overall-based approach (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007) and provides a contribution to understanding WLB as a complex and dynamic concept influenced by multi-layered factors. The research findings show, on the one hand, work and life must be viewed as interconnected and not as separate entities in people's lives. This argument contributes to a critique of the false dichotomy of work and life segmentation and echoes the latest developed integrated perspectives of WLB (Bloom, 2016; Lewis et al., 2007). On the other hand, work-life integration is complex and dynamic because an individual's perceptions, priorities, and choices in relation to WLB can be shaped by factors at the national, organisational and individual levels (Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013; Trefalt et al., 2013). These multi-layered factors work together making WLB a socially-constructed concept rather than an individual choice (Lewis et al., 2007; Lewis and Beauregard, 2018).

Secondly, this research contributes to a critical analysis of how the meaning of work-life discourse is influenced by the context. The research findings show Chinese employees embrace work-life integration and appreciate life enrichment, which resonates with the existing cross-cultural WLB research in the Chinese context (Lu et al., 2010; Spector et al., 2007). However, this research interprets this similar finding differently. It is argued that cultural factors are not be a critical factor in shaping individuals' WLB perceptions. Instead of overstating the impact of Chinese culture, economic and institutional factors possess stronger explanatory powers when interpreting work-life integration and enrichment.

In the competitive market economy, employees, as passive recipients of the employers and managerial prerogative, are forced to allow work to “integrate” (occupy) their life. However, work-based achievements can be major sources of financial rewards, self-esteem and commitment leading to a better life. Even if employees appear to experience poor WLB due to long working hours, work intensification and limited formal work-life management, the integration perspective may offset work-life tensions, leading to WLB being achieved in a psychological sense. Nevertheless, it can be argued that psychological WLB appears both superficial and unsustainable; it may not be sufficient to address the material work-life conflicts caused by the productivity orientation of the market economy, the power differentials within the employment relationship, and gendered labour divisions. In essence, this reflects more broadly the nature of work and work-life experiences in the global market economy. This can explain why emerging WLB research increasingly highlights integration and enrichment perspectives rather than traditional conflict and segmentation views (Bloom, 2016; Lewis et al., 2007). Consequently, one of the contributions of the research is to show the applicability of work-life integration and enrichment approaches, derived from Anglo-American research, in the Chinese context.

Thirdly, regarding work-life management, this research unveils both the formal (WLBPPs) and informal (WLBC) approaches in the Chinese workplace, and critically analyses how these are made available and how they are effective for employees and the organisation. Although systematic work-life management arrangements are absent from Chinese organisations, an array of relevant work regulations and social policies, and organisational practices do exist in Chinese workplaces, and can be grouped together as relatively formal WLBPPs. However, the implementation of WLBPPs is problematic in terms of their availability, usage, and effectiveness, limiting their role as potential “best

practice” approaches. Since formal approaches rarely exist and are not followed, most WLB arrangements are reached informally through line management.

It is argued that such managerial informality is a double-edged effect. Informality may not address employee’s WLB needs and request and issues around the fairness, relating to unequal access to the line manager’s grace and favour, can weaken the construction of a positive WLB context. Most Anglo-American research concludes that work-life management, including the WLBPPs and a supportive WLB context, may provide set coping mechanisms for employees and be beneficial to the organisation. However, this research demonstrates distinctiveness of the Chinese workplace and, thus, the problems of applying a Anglo-American work-life framework in a Chinese context.

Last but not least, this research makes a contribution by testing the appropriateness of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), the frameworks constructed around the availability, usage and usefulness of WLBPPs (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Daniels and French, 2006) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) in the Chinese context. The JD-R model, which analyses the drivers of employee’ WLB, can be critically applied in the Chinese organisational setting. Dominant work demands, including long working hours and excessive workload, tend to deplete employees’ energy levels, leading to a work-life imbalance. This research argues this negative relationship is not absolute. Following the integration and enrichment perspective, the sense of security, financial and career rewards that arise resulted from work may act as a buffer against negative aspects of work demands to that they perceive themselves to have a WLB in the short-term. This may also help to explain the lack of a statistically significant relationship between employees’ WLB and job performance in this research. In the current Chinese workplace where

performance-related pay and career prospects remain highly valued, WLB is viewed far less as a performance motivator.

Regarding the main WLB related resources, WLBPPs and WLBC can facilitate employees' WLB under certain conditions. Although analysis of the survey data indicated that WLBPPs were not positively correlated to employees' WLB, it is argued that this does not directly undermine the theoretical explanations embodied within the JD-R model but enriches the model from another perspective, namely that perceived WLB resources be a motivating factor (Voyadanoff, 2005). This research then examined the Budd and Mumford (2006) and Daniels and French (2006) frameworks in the Chinese context, highlighting similar findings: having WLBPPs do not necessarily mean they work, as best practice approaches, for employees and the organisation. Critically, the managerial informality lies at the centre of Chinese work-life management. The supportive informal work-life management may lead to performance improvements based on employer-manager reciprocity, operating through the social exchange mechanism. However, the negative sides of managerial informality may actually exclude (some) employees from offering reciprocal work behaviours. This challenges the theoretical assumptions of the inter-relationships between work-related resources (i.e. WLBPPs and WLBC) and job performance made by social exchange theory.

8.2.1.2 Contribution to HRM literature

This research also contributes to a critical analysis of wider HRM literature. One aspect of this is lack of HR strategy in relation to employees' wellbeing; the other is the problem of managerial informality in terms of the wider issues including the enforcement of job regulation, and the transparency, fairness and non-discrimination of HR management.

These two points should not be merely regarded as Chinese issues but reflect generic HRM issues.

First, this research makes a limited contribution to strategic HRM literature that acknowledges wellbeing-oriented HRM is beneficial for both employees and organisational sustainability as a potential direction for high-performance work systems (Guest, 2017). HRM, it is argued, is focused on managing people for the mutual benefit of employees and the organisation. However, with the process of marketisation and western HRM learning, developing Chinese HRM systems tend to construct high-performance work systems with the single aim of organisational profitability. This research highlights that such performance-based HRM systems can be beneficial to the organisation but harm employees' wellbeing (Zhao et al., 2017a). As Guest (2017: 22) argues that "it seems a link between HRM and performance has been pursued at the expense of concern for employee well-being". Employees' WLB is one of the typical victims.

This research, taking WLB as an example, highlights that HRM research, not only in China, should not overlook the goal of mutual development and promote benefits for both employees and the organisation. Work-life management (adopting WLBPPs and constructing WLBC) have provided Anglo-American researchers with an opportunity to examine HRM, not just by considering employees' performance but by incorporating wellbeing into the strategic HRM (e.g. Kaufman, 2015; Guest, 2017). It is argued, that despite the lack of such an inclusive strategic approach to HRM in China, that there is scope, drawing on political calls for a harmonious workplace and humanized management, for Chinese HRM to research and apply the work-life management as the

findings indicate that the offering WLBPBs and WLBC in a supportive way could be conducive to employees' WLB and work-related behaviours.

Secondly, Gilbert (2015) argues that HRM implementation and the relevant workplace context into which it is embedded, have both been under-researched. This research by studying both WLBPBs and the WLBC in the Chinese workplace contributes to a critical analysis of managerial informality in the operation of HRM. Drawing on Weber's argument of formal and substantive rationality (Weber, 1978), not only does the informality emerge in the management of employees' work-life issues but characterises in the general workplace HRM. The effectiveness of HRM implementation is the key to HRM's success, and it is argued line management is key to its implementation.

This research highlights the role of line management in the wider range of HRM practices. The line manager is rarely assigned an active and formal role in the design and specifically in the implementation of HR related policies (Straub et al., 2018). The research indicates that managerial informality is not the patent of small business (Kitching and Marlow, 2013), but exists in larger (SOE) organisations. With the progress of organisational flattening, each level of management enjoys more autonomy and line managers are empowered to control employees' working time, intensity and flexibility on an ad hoc basis. Managerial informality applied in an employee-friendly way may promote reciprocal employee responses, in terms of attitudes and behaviours, but managers' subjectivity and favouritism, related to Guanxi in Chinese context, may be counterproductive. This indicates the problems with managerial informality in terms of the wider context of the enforcement of job regulations, and the transparency, fairness

and non-discrimination in HR management, rather than merely the field of work-life management.

8.2.1.3 Contribution to Methodology

This research responds to the methodological call for work-life research to adopt mixed methods, including social policy data collection, quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) approaches, to examine WLB issues in greater depth and breadth (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017; Lu and Cooper, 2015). First, mixed methods approach adopted in the research provided multiple data sources (quantitative and qualitative) to help explore and understand WLB issues in the selected Chinese workplaces. Each of the data sources help perform a research function: quantitative data provide a general picture of WLB issues, and the qualitative data help to explain the causality between the statistical outcomes and relationships (in line with the deductive theoretical framework adopted) and examine the meaning of WLB and work-life management in the Chinese workplace context.

For example, there is no significant correlation between WLBPPs and WLB from the survey data, which appears to contradict the assumptions laid out in the theoretical framework and based upon the JD-R model. However, the interview data help to explain the reasons for a statistically non-significant relationship. These explanations do not lead to a rejection of the research framework but highlight the intricate relationship between WLBPPs and employees' WLB in terms of availability and effectiveness. As Lu et al., (2015a) argue, since WLB is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, evolving over time and involving various actors, in-depth qualitative data contribute to explain how people's WLB is impacted by work interventions. Overall, the multi-sources of the data, and data

triangulation, provided the researcher with evidence to discover data consistency and contingency (Jack and Raturi, 2006) and thereby construct a robust understanding of the data to effectively address the research questions.

Furthermore, the sources of the data collection broaden the research by including both the views of employees and managers. This helps to avoid the bias that often arises from research which only seeks to understand HRM related questions through a managerial lens. Chinese HRM research has been primarily managerialist for a long period. Cooke (2009a) observes that two-thirds of Chinese HRM studies published in major business and management journals from 1998 to 2000 collected only managerial data. The employees' views and attitudes are, however, very meaningful and indicative of the management of Chinese enterprise reform (Danford and Zhao, 2012). Employees' perspectives on the WLB issues constitute the prime focus of this research; meanwhile, the managerial perspective cannot be overlooked or underestimated. Both data sources significantly contributed to the research, so that it reflects both employer and managerial views towards work-life management. In addition, research findings are strengthened by the fact that line and middle management participants expressed two standpoints in terms of their dual identities as employees and managers.

8.2.2 Practical implications

Through examining the meaning of WLB, this research identifies the scope for work-life management to improve employees' wellbeing, with positive implications for human capital and organisational development, particularly in the context of China. Work-life management is both complex and dynamic, entailing radical innovation and progressive adjustment due to the socially constructed nature of WLB. Considering Chinese

employment policy and HRM practice is underpinned by a ‘top-down’ institutional environment, the practical implications of the research will be considered from the national to the organisational level.

8.2.2.1 Practical implications at the national level

Issues of WLB require broader political and societal debates over policies and employee voices. Work-life “imbalance” has increased as a phenomenon in China with the rapid economic and social transition, but the issues employees face has not been raised as a critical concern. After three decades of economic development, ‘social construction’ has now become an important policy agenda in China. The agenda of the 19th CPC National Congress focuses on improving people’s livelihoods and the development of social policy. Concerning and promoting WLB can be an important topic to improve the employees’ wellbeing and respond to this political advocacy. However, Chinese society has been currently undergoing dramatic transformations; the dominant economic orientation and convergence of western and Chinese values threatens to overwhelm concerns for WLB. "What is the work-life balance, and how does one achieve it?" are, therefore, urgent and significant questions that need to be addressed. This research indicates that achieving the proposed goals of social development (i.e. “the construction of harmonious society”) requires constructing a more robust legislative and institutional system in Chinese society. Measures to extend and, more importantly, to enforces legal rights pertaining to WLB are required to ensure WLB are implemented, and not marginalized by employer countermeasures, to facilitate social equality and harmony.

Even though, as this research has highlighted, there is no strategic work-life management in the Chinese organisation, the state has extended legislation to cover a wide range of

employee work-life rights and benefits. However, two issues give rise for concern. First, one of the critical issues is the lack of availability and inequality of access to these regulations and policies in the workplace. To deal with this, it will be essential to provide (and fund) supervisory and enforcement mechanisms to open up access to these legal rights. Secondly, in terms of policy innovation and adjustment, there may be an appropriate need for the Chinese government to learn from the successful western experience (e.g. Work-Life Balance Campaign in the UK, family-friendly policies in the EU), incorporating these aspects of WLB into social development. As the development of Chinese HRM and employment relations is largely policy-driven the policy-makers need to realise that public and employer policies have genuine consequences for people and organisations (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017). The "harmony consensus" embedded in the social development should be substantially delivered into all employing organisations, and there needs to be wider recognition that work-life management does not necessarily lead to an increased cost burden but can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes.

8.2.2.2 Practical implications at the organisational level

This research could also be useful for Chinese organisations to understand the linkage between human resource development (HRD) and organisational sustainability from the perspective of WLB. The findings indicate that Chinese organisations should review or update their HR strategies and practices in managing employee performance to build in more consideration of work-life issues. While the research suggests that both formal and informal work-life management approaches can be conducive to improving employees' job performance, organisations, charged with contributing to the "construction a harmonious society", need to implement humanised work arrangements places greater

emphasis on employees' well-being and organisational sustainability rather than merely targeting the business growth.

The starting point for this is for employers to fully take on their legal and ethical responsibilities and comply with external work regulations and social policies to protect employees' right and benefits. On top of that, while informal approaches are prevalent in the Chinese workplace, the findings suggest that the formalisation of work-life management is required. Organisations need to integrate WLB into strategic design of HR policies and their daily operation. Employees' WLB needs to be valued in organisational HRM strategies, demonstrating an appreciation of employees' worth in order to attract, retain and develop them. The understanding and endorsement of employees' WLB issues from the employer are necessary through a clear policy regarding the availability and equal allocation of WLBPPs raising the following questions: what initiatives are needed to accommodate employees' work-life needs?; how should WLB initiatives operate?; and what support should be provided for line managers delivering and administering the practices?

Critically, since line managers increasingly takes on aspects of the HR function in daily management, they should be given a formal role in the design and implementation process to minimise the potential risks of managerial informality. This formal role must include a clearly defined and expected behaviour about the utilisation of WLBPPs, , provided that both the organisation's and the employees objectives are met (Straub et al., 2018). Meanwhile, WLB and family-friendly values also need to be incorporated into the organisational and workplace culture, because it is instrumental in constructing a supportive WLB context. In the Chinese workplace, while humanised management is

flagged up, as the finding suggests, some employees still fear that requesting the work-life benefits may lead them to be seen as uncommitted and unprofessional. Only if the employer complies with the legislation and demonstrate the commitment to care for employees, will line managers then be able to cross the cost and power thresholds to offer WLBPPs and promote a more employee-friendly WLBC. In these circumstances, employees would be prepared to raise their work-life priorities and feel comfortable in taking advantage of work-life benefits, with less fearing what the consequences might be for their pay and career (Siu, 2015). In addition, as the ACAS guidance on WLB advises, the work-life policy needs to clearly demonstrate that "the organisation is committed to ensuring that individuals who request work-life arrangements are not treated less favourably than their colleagues." (ACAS, 2015: 17) This statement that assures the equal availability of WLBPPs is significant, especially in the Guan-xi dominated Chinese workplace.

The HR department should work as the link between employees and all levels of management to coordinate and facilitate work-life management. Considering the limited adoption of WLBPPs within Chinese organisations, HR professionals need to support the strategic design of work-life management. For instance, it would be a good start to research and learn from the successful experiences of work-life "best practice" from the western companies, MNCs located in China and pioneer Chinese companies that have provided WLBPPs. At the same time, as the research indicates, any "imported" best practice needs to be aligned to match the organisation's goals, strategies, culture and values, and engage employees through consultation on WLB issues. In doing so, the organisation can not only avoid rolling out unnecessary and potentially costly work-life programmes but create a framework which fits with employees' work-life concerns in

general. In practice, HR professionals could become pioneers by: getting the practices publicised so that all levels of staff understand WLBPPs; providing guidance to employees around making requests and using WLBPPs; training line managers to understand the rationale for work-life management and informing them about their formal roles and responsibilities in implementing WLBPPs and fostering the WLBC (ibid.).

Last but not least, this research highlights the active role played by line managers in influencing employees' WLB through informal work-life management arrangements and how, ultimately, this impacts on job performance. The line manager needs to not only value employees' performance and effort but recognise and support their efforts in managing their various life roles (Singh et al., 2018), and do this regardless of a person's background. To do this, line management should understand the rationale for their involvement, be clear about their role, capability expectations, and commit to work-life management.

In terms of day-to-day management, managers should assist employees with realistic workload setting and career planning (Zhang et al., 2014), and they need to be sensitive to the range of circumstances their employees face and demonstrate empathy, fairness and transparency when dealing with employees' working time, workload and work flexibility. Following on from the discussion of Guanxi highlights the importance of a formal process, so that the manager is more likely to oversee work-life arrangements in a fair and equitable manner (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2017). In addition, the line manager should take responsibility for providing employees with a supportive climate that engages employees, shares their experiences about their work-life management and which can be used to feed back issues to HR and senior management in the organisation. This, it is

argued, can build mutual understanding and/or trust between them, in turn facilitating reciprocal behaviours of benefit to the organisation (ibid. Chen et al., 2018).

8.3 Research limitations

The study's limitations mainly relate to the extent to which the research can be generalised. Given the fieldwork centred on single case study of two organisations, with similar forms of ownership and located in the same sector and geographical region of China, the extent to which the research findings can be generalised is limited (Yin, 2014). Moreover, the participants are mostly white-collar employees, including professional, technical and skilled employees in the pharmaceutical sector. While the survey data fit the normal distribution and analysis of the interviews indicates data saturation, the relatively small samples (312 survey responses and 23 interviews) did not provide sufficient information to generalise this to all Chinese employees. As there are significant contextual heterogeneities within China, i.e. different types of employees, ownership of organisations, sectors and industries and also regions embody different characteristics. This leaves the question as to whether the discourse and practices of WLB in China would be different for the other types of employees, ownership of organisations, sectors and regions. More broadly, the national contextual factors may also question the transferability of the results to other national contexts. Given that representativeness of the sample is a proxy for the robustness of the research, this research overall can be said to lack generalisability. Accordingly, there is the potential to improve the research by replicating this study using more case organisations and covering a larger numbers of participants in the wider range of China.

Several research limitations are caused by the constraints faced by the researcher in terms of access to the case organisations. First, data analysis and triangulation were restricted by a shortage of internal organisational documents. For example, there are no data on the employment structure of each organisation, making it difficult to ensure the selected survey and interview samples are representative, although the viability checks were done to assure that both data generally had internal generalisation in organisations; without clear reference to the organisations' employment and HRM policies and practices, there could have been a mismatch between practices which could fall under WLBPPs and those listed in the questionnaire. The WLBPPs referred to in the questionnaire mainly derive from academic (Anglo-American) literature and general Chinese documentation, and this may not have been sufficient to catch the specific organisational policies and practices related to employees' WLB. These concerns were, however, reduced by piloting the survey and using the interviews to explore the workplace context in relation to WLBPPs. Secondly, it was noted that objections could be raised to using self-reported job performance in the survey as a proxy for actual data on job performance, especially when these data were used to test relationships derived from the theoretical framework. It was also the case here that limited access to data on the two organisations meant that only a subjective evaluation of job performance could be measured in this research. It is acknowledged that examining performance both subjectively (in the survey) and objectively (from line managers or organisational data on performance outcomes) would have improved the reliability of the data on job performance (Chen et al., 2002).

8.4 Recommendations for future research

The research opens up several new avenues for work-life and HRM research. First, this research identifies the need for comparative WLB research across Anglo-American and

non-western national contexts to examine further a conceptual framework of WLB based on an overall-based approach (Grzywacz and Carlson, 2007). This research contributes to a critical analysis of how meaning of work-life discourse is influenced by the research context, but this needs to be explored further through comparative empirical research. Although there are a handful of comparative studies on work-life issues, which include China (Ling and Powell, 2001; Lu et al., 2010; Spector et al., 2007), most of these analyse work-life discourse in terms from a cross-cultural perspective. As this research argues, this overstates the cultural influence and underestimates the role that economic, political and social forces have in shaping organisational behaviour and employees' work-life perceptions and experiences. Therefore, it is meaningful to conduct empirical comparison research between across developed and emerging economies, including China, but not limited to China, to promote the polycontextualisation of WLB research.

Secondly, there is an important need for WLB research to capture the views of a more diverse group of working people, such as blue-collar workers (Warren, 2016) and younger workers³⁶. In line with much of the prevailing Anglo-American WLB research, this research primarily focused upon white-collar employees. This is because, on the one hand, the nature of their work is more easily related to negative work-life spillover; on the other hand, the relatively higher amounts of human capital they own can be instrumental in seeking and negotiating alternative working modes and work-life benefits. The skewed nature of this research sample reinforces how the voices of non-white collar employees are largely unheard in the work-life research. While China's workforce grown

³⁶ This applies to those born after 1989. Their Western equivalents are known as generations Y and Z. According to the market monitoring company Horizon, there are 140 million people in China who were born after 1990, constituting 11.7% of the entire population. This younger generation tends to have different WLB preferences and are argued to hold more individualistic working attitudes and different gender perceptions than the older generation (Wu and Uen, 2015).

substantially both in quantity and quality, compared to white-collar workers, other workers employees who may have greater financial concerns make up the majority of the workforce (ibid.). In this case, WLB may be perceived as having a different meaning – and these workers may embrace work-life integration and enrichment for personal survival rather than achievement. Correspondingly, work-life management and social implications can be different. Given that, research needs to go further to examine the meaning of WLB for different occupations.

Thirdly, a fruitful avenue for future research could consider the interactive effects of work-life practices and mainstream HRM systems (e.g. high-performance and high-commitment work systems) on employees and organisations. The current research challenges previous finding that regards WLBPPs as a best practice (e.g., Gajendran et al., 2015; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010) because work-life management is arranged through managerial informality. Future studies exploring the effects of work-life practices on performance outcomes needs to test more complex models of this relationship (Beauregard and Henry, 2009), and examine how to embed WLBPPs and the (formal) role of line management into the prevailing core HR practices, and to use research to demonstrate how these policies and practices can be linked to increased productivity. If the linkages between wellbeing and productivity are fully established, it will contribute to strengthening well-being oriented HRM systems (Guest, 2017) and promote work-life management from the perspective of strategic HRM.

Fourthly, a potential area of interest for future research would be to broaden the scope of WLB support by considering not only organisational resources but also personal and family resources, especially from the family domain. The concept of linked lives allows

researchers to examine the crossover effects of family members (resources) on employees' work-life experiences (e.g., Zhang et al., 2013; Ho et al., 2013). Existing research indicates that extended family support is significantly effective and a reliable source for Chinese employees to address caring responsibilities (e.g., Yang et al., 2000; Ling and Powell, 2009). However, in the current Chinese society, with the shift to a two-child policy and an aging population, the demands of childcare and elderly care are increasing whereas extended family resources have been decreasing. With that in mind, one of the topics worthy of further investigation could be how organisational and family resources may together to support employees' WLB.

Last but not least, longitudinal WLB research needs to be undertaken. One of the striking features in work-family/life balance research is the dominance of cross-sectional designs, including this research. Lu et al., (2015a) argue this may lead to a failure to understand the complex and dynamic nature of WLB. Longitudinal research can contribute to addressing this gap. It may help explore the causal relationships between WLB and its antecedents and consequences (e.g. Dormann and Zapf, 2002; Kossek and Lee, 2017), but can encompass life-course perspectives, over which there is much theory but little empirical evidence (Trefalt, et al., 2013). The main debate of the life-course perspective is people's WLB perceptions and experience are dynamic and change with the demographic and career shifts. Therefore, the life course perspective integrates historical, social, and organisational contexts into WLB research (ibid.). However, the longitudinal design is found challenging in terms of the research feasibility considering the extensive involvement of time, money and data management (Crouter and Pirretti, 2006). This is also the primary reason that such a potentially beneficial research design was not planned in this research. Despite that, it is believed, where feasible, that longitudinal WLB

research would be very valuable to examine the more nuanced work-life issues from the life-course perspective.

8.5 Conclusions

Work-life issues have attracted considerable research and policy attention, driven by the impact on globalisation, new technologies and demographic changes. Employees are attempting to juggle multiple work and life demands. This is not only commonplace in Anglo-American societies but also in emerging economies, such as China. China has experienced rapid economic and social transformation over the past four decades. During this time, Chinese employees' perceptions and experiences of WLB are driven and shaped by external shifts and developments; correspondingly, Chinese approaches to WLB are required to adjust to these external environmental changes and employees' work-life needs. However, over 95% of research into the work-family/life interface is based in the Anglo-America and Europe (e.g. Kossek et al., 2011a; Casper et al., 2007), and it is extremely unclear how WLB is interpreted and what approaches of work-life management go about in China as these areas are under-researched. This research contributes to bridging this gap. Underpinned by work-life balance and HRM literature, this research has gained a robust understanding of the WLB discourse in the Chinese context by conducting a single case study of two Chinese State-owned enterprises (SOEs) using a mixed methods approach.

The findings show there is no consensus over what WLB means in China. The nature of WLB is complex and dynamic, and it is socially-constructed by the national, organisational and individual context. Analysing these multi-layered factors, it would appear that Chinese employees experience poor WLB due to long working hours, work

intensification and limited formal work-life support. Despite this, the dominant perceptions of employees indicate a relatively positive WLB in the sense of work-life integration and enrichment. Given that, this research argues Chinese employees experience both a superficial and unsustainable WLB. The balance is constrained by the irreconcilable divisions between employees' ever-growing needs for a better quality of life and the productivity orientation of organisations operating in the market economy, as well as power inequality in the employment relationship.

This research then identified and explored approaches to work-life management in the Chinese workplace to explore how arrangements were made to address WLB issues, which is significant, given that Chinese employees' WLB are rarely considered in the HRM research. Although an array of relevant work regulations and social policies, and organisational practices are available in the Chinese workplace, and can be grouped as a set of relatively formal WLBPPs, the implementation of these policies is problematic. There may be gaps existing between the availability, usage, and effectiveness of WLBPPs, limiting their role as "best practice" approaches. Since the formal approaches rarely exist and are not followed, most WLB solutions are reached informally in a WLB context constructed by the organisational, managerial and collegial supports. Here, line management appears to play the key role in fostering the "best context". However, managerial informality can have a double-edged effect. Managing employees' work-life issue on an informal basis, directly by the line manager, may be a cost-effective, prompt and flexible way to respond to organisational and employees' needs. However, it may be conducted in an employee-unfriendly and discriminatory manner, which may damage employees' wellbeing as well as organisational sustainability.

While this research only scratches the surface of Chinese WLB issues and is limited, the views and attitudes elicited directly from Chinese employees and managers in the two pharmaceutical SOEs are instructive. This research contributes to work-life literature by providing a critical analysis of how the meaning of work-life discourse is contextually influenced, and by exploring formal and informal approaches to work-life management in the Chinese workplace. It also demonstrates the problems of applying a deductive Anglo-American WLB framework to the under-researched and distinctive Chinese context. Furthermore, rather than merely be relevant to the field of work-life management, this research also contributes to a critical analysis of HRM.

On the one hand, from the strategic HRM perspective, this research acknowledges that wellbeing-oriented HRM may provide a potential alternative route to secure a high-performance work system (Guest, 2017). On the other hand, it indicates, under the highlighted marketisation, that job regulations on paper, may be far from effective in terms of their enforcement in practice; the problems of managerial informality may lead to wider issues of transparency, fairness and non-discrimination for HR management. These contributions benefit from the application of mixed methods and the analysis of the multi-sources of data triangulation, which significantly enhances the quality of the research findings.

Having clarified the unsustainable WLB environment and inadequate work-life management practices in the Chinese workplace, Chinese HRM is invited to ponder on employees' work-life management strategically. In particular, it is time to regard WLB as a part of the ecological balance of the organisation for human capital and organisational development, linking employees' work-life issues with organisational sustainability. On

the one hand, employees should not only be acknowledged for their performance and effort but fairly and empathically cared for in the workplace. On the other hand, a more formal work-life management regime is required, incorporated into HRM strategies and processes, to address the contradictions between unbalanced and inadequate human resource development (prevalent and problematic managerial informality) and employees' ever-growing needs for a better quality of working life.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval Letter



Ref: ERP1294

31 August 2016

Mengyi Xu
Keele Management School
Darwin Building

Dear Mengyi

The work-life balance of white-collar employees: A case study of a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in urban China

Thank you for submitting your revised application for review.

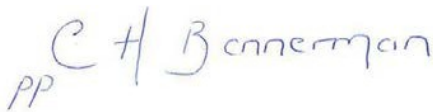
I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethics Review Panel. The following documents have been reviewed and approved by the panel as follows:

Document(s)	Version Number	Date
Invitation Letters x3 – Company/HR Gatekeeper, Managers and Employees	3	26-08-2016
Survey Information Sheet	2	23-08-2016
Interview Information Sheet	4	31-08-2016
Questionnaire	2	23-08-2016
Consent Form	4	31-08-2016
Consent for the use of quotes	4	31-08-2016
Interview Indicative Questions	1	25-07-2016

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application, **30th September 2017**, or there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at research.erps@keele.ac.uk stating **ERP1** in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on research.erps@keele.ac.uk stating **ERP1** in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely



Handwritten signature: C H Benneman

Dr Jackie Waterfield
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

CC RI Manager Supervisor

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Appendix B: Questionnaire survey (with frequency details)

Section 1 Working hours and workload (French, 2014)

The section below expects to find out about your working hours and commuting time as well as work load.

Working hours

1. How many hours are you contracted to work each week?

Responses	N (%)
Under 29 hours	0 (0%)
30-34 hours	17 (5.4%)
35-39 hours	52 (16.7%)
40-44 hours	156 (50.0%)
45-49 hours	60 (19.2%)
50-54 hours	18 (5.8%)
55-59 hours	9 (2.9%)
Total response	312(100%)

2. How many days do you actually work on average each week (including time spent working from home)?

Responses	N (%)
5 days	115 (36.9%)
5.5 days	57 (18.3%)
6 days	114 (36.5%)
6.5 days	8 (2.6%)
7 days	18 (5.8%)
Total responses	312

3. How many hours do you actually work on average each week (including time spent working from home?)

Responses	N (%)
Under 29 hours	0 (0%)
30-34 hours	5 (1.6%)
35-39 hours	39 (12.5%)
40-44 hours	76 (24.4%)
45-49 hours	101 (32.3%)
50-54 hours	33 (10.6%)
55-59 hours	24 (7.7%)
60-64 hours	20 (6.4%)
65-69 hours	12 (3.8%)
Over 70 hours	2 (0.6%)
Total response	312(100%)

3.1 If you have indicated in last question that you work over your contracted hours, what are the main reasons for any additional hours you work? [Multi-choices] [Ranked]

Responses	N (%)
To keep up with my workload	184 (58.57%)
I like the sense of achievement I get at work	77 (24.68%)
I enjoy my work	72 (23.08%)
To gain promotion	66 (21.15%)
The hours I work are planned	59 (18.91%)
Pressure from line managers	59 (18.91%)
I am afraid of losing my job	32 (10.26%)
I enjoy being with colleagues	23 (7.37%)
I am afraid of cutting my salary	13 (4.17%)
For overtime payments	13 (4.17%)
Pressure from colleagues	9 (2.88%)

Other reason from employees' perspective: Company A: Do not want to drag the work progress To promote organisational/team performance Emergency to be sorted out Company B: Learn more at work Improve personal professional capacity Expect to improve personal work quality Every staff overworks Pressure from the project schedule Pressure from customer demands	18 (5.77%)
Total responses	312

4. Compare a year ago, have your average weekly working hours?

Responses	N (%)
Decreased	23 (7.4%)
Remained the same	182 (58.3%)
Increased	107 (34.3%)
Total responses	312

5. How long is your journey to your normal place of work (work location)?

Responses	N (%)
Up to half an hour	119 (38.1%)
Half an hour to hour	105 (33.7%)
An hour to two hours	61(19.6%)
Over two hours	27 (8.7%)
Total responses	312

Workload

6. What do you think of your workload?

Responses	N (%)
Relaxed	6 (1.9%)
Moderate and under control	125 (40.1%)
Heavy but under control	170 (54.5%)
Too heavy to control	11 (3.5%)
Total responses	312

7. Compared to a year ago, has your workload?

Responses	N (%)
Decreased	22 (7.1%)
Remained the same	173 (55.4%)
Increased	117 (37.5%)
Total responses	312

7.1 If you have indicated in the last question that your workload has increased over the last year, what are the main reasons for the increasing workload? [Multi-choices] [Ranked]

The main reasons for the increasing workload	N (%)
Increased personal targets in career development	53 (45.30%)
Job vacancies	36 (30.77%)
Introduction of new working practices (e.g. performance appraisal)	31 (26.50%)
Pressure from line managers	24 (20.51%)
Reduced staffing levels	20 (17.09%)
Other reasons	19 (16.23%)
Introduction of new work systems (e.g. IT)	12 (10.91%)
Other: Company A: Release/Increase the new products /projects /businesses Increased job responsibility and content Increase work stress; Company B: Total workload increases but the number of staff remains the same; Work position changed; Work content is refined in detail, so that increase the workload; Pressure from the project schedule	19 (16.23%)
Total responses	117

Section 2 Work–life balance

The section below expects to find out some information on your work and non-work activities (i.e. Regular activities, outside of work such as family, friends, sports and study over the past few months)

8. How do you think of work-life balance?

Question	Not at all aware	Slightly aware	Moderately aware	Very aware	Extremely aware	Total responses
To what extent are you aware of the perception, work-life balance?	35 (11.2%)	105 (33.7%)	88 (28.2%)	56 (21.5%)	28 (9.0%)	312 (100%)
Question	Not at all familiar	Slightly familiar	Moderately familiar	Very familiar	Extremely familiar	Total responses
To what extent are you familiar with the perception, work-life balance?	66 (21.2%)	140 (44.9%)	54 (17.3%)	40 (12.8%)	12 (3.8%)	312 (100%)

9. To what extent do you agree with the following statements in terms of your current job?

Statement	Strong disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Time balance: I currently have a good balance between the time I spend at work and the time I have available for non-work activities (Brough et al., 2014)	38 (12.2%)	117 (37.5%)	69 (22.1%)	77 (24.7%)	11 (3.5%)
Demand balance: I feel that the balance between my work demands and non-work activities is currently about right (Brough et al., 2014)	28 (9.0%)	121 (38.8%)	65 (20.8%)	88 (28.2%)	10 (3.2%)
Work-to-life stress: Due to all the pressures at work, sometimes when I come home, I am too stressed to do the things I enjoy. (Guttek ,1991) (R)	24 (7.7%)	98 (31.4%)	69 (22.1%)	98 (31.4%)	23 (7.4%)
Life-to-work stress: Tension and anxiety from my personal life often weaken my ability to do my job (Guttek, 1991) (R)	31 (9.9%)	144 (46.21%)	61 (19.6%)	69 (22.1%)	7 (2.2%)
Work flexibility: I am able to negotiate and accomplish what is expected of me at work (Carlson et al., 2009)	29 (9.3%)	127 (40.7%)	62 (19.9%)	84 (26.9%)	10 (3.2%)
Life flexibility: I am able to negotiate and accomplish what is expected of me in my family (Carlson et al., 2009)	1 (0.3%)	47 (15.1%)	64 (20.5%)	149 (47.8%)	51 (16.3%)

Objective (relatively) view of your WLB: People who are close to me would say that I do a good job of balancing work and family. (Carlson et al., 2009)	3 (1.0%)	105 (33.7%)	77 (24.7%)	101 (32.4%)	26 (8.3%)
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Section 3 Work-life balance support

The section below expects to find out your experience and expectation of work-life balance practices and the supportive working environment in your organisation.

Work-life balance policies and practices

10. Which of the flowing are available in your workplace to help to balance your work and life? (French, 2014)

Categories	Statement	Do not know	Not available	Available	Available and have used	Available used and found useful
Work-life balance related policies	Working hours regulation (up to 44 hours per week)	5 (1.6%)	87 (27.9%)	21 (6.7%)	120 (38.5%)	79 (25.3%)
	Leave entitlement: Annual/Maternity/Paternity/Parental leave	17 (5.4%)	58 (18.6%)	134 (42.9%)	68 (21.8%)	35 (11.2%)
	Social security system	0 (0%)	5 (1.6%)	51 (16.2%)	81 (26.1%)	175 (56.1%)
Flexible working arrangement	Tele-working	15 (4.8%)	140 (44.9%)	97 (31.1%)	42 (13.5%)	18 (5.8%)
	Term time only working	34 (10.9%)	183 (58.7%)	63 (20.2%)	22 (7.1%)	10 (3.2%)
	Part-time	24 (7.7%)	170 (54.5%)	71 (22.8%)	33 (10.6%)	14 (4.5%)
	Job-sharing	17 (5.4%)	49 (15.7%)	153 (49.0%)	70 (22.4%)	23 (7.4%)
	Flexible start and finish times	9 (2.9%)	146 (46.8%)	85 (27.2%)	52 (16.7%)	20 (6.4%)
Workload management	Training /support in managing workload	25 (8.0%)	19 (6.1%)	157 (50.3%)	89 (28.5%)	34 (10.9%)
	Agreeing objectives and targets	19 (6.1%)	31 (9.9%)	148 (47.4%)	86 (27.6%)	28 (9.0%)
	Agreeing clear and attainable deadlines	12 (6.9%)	21 (12%)	95 (54.29%)	36 (20.57%)	11 (6.29%)

Personal and family life support	Help with childcare care	39 (12.5%)	58 (18.6%)	136 (43.6%)	56 (17.9%)	23 (7.4%)
	Help with elderly care	38 (12.2%)	49 (15.7%)	146 (46.8%)	51 (16.3%)	28 (9.0%)
	Employee counselling schemes	48 (15.4%)	59 (18.9%)	141 (45.2%)	50 (16.0%)	14 (4.5%)
	Stress management training	45 (14.4%)	39 (12.5%)	143 (45.8%)	62 (19.9%)	23 (7.4%)

Open Questions: Do other work-life balance practices exist in your workplace?	
<p><u>Work domain:</u> Both Company A and B's employees expect to provide policies that manage employees' WLB.</p> <p>Company A</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> leave entitlements: an increase of leaves in quantity and quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual leave (effective implementation of paid annual leave; annual leave is not linked with performance) Employees' leave demand needs to be considered timely especially under the emergence. Superiors are suggested to approve the leave request in a professional manner) Taking leaves as a reward. Work mechanism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve overtime pay system Improve the working mechanism and efficiency, reduce unnecessary reporting and assessment and strengthen the application of IT platforms. Working arrangement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible work mode options Workload management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreeing and implementable personal goals and tasks; Reasonable task indicators and appropriate workload. The working environment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a more pleasant working environment As for special groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job rotation More protection policies for female employees (not just limited to implement national policies) 	<p>Company B</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> working arrangement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expect to leave work on time Expect flexible rather than the rigid working arrangement work mechanism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expect to conduct project management mechanism Appropriate work review workload management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quantify the workload in advance Encourage job sharing rather than solo-work. the working environment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relieve the stressful work atmosphere. external issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expect GDP up-trend <p><u>Personal life domain:</u></p> <p>Company A</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Collective tourism Provide childcare and pension support Solve the issue of children schooling, daily shuttle problem Organise family activities in workplace (e.g. Family Day) <p>Company B</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Except organisation to provide Nursery and Trusteeship during summer holiday.

The work-life balance context

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statements on a supportive working environment (Organisational, managerial and collegial support/ career consequence/ time expectations)? (Dikker et al., 2004)

Statement	Strong disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
In general, my company is considerate towards employees' private situation.	12(3.8%)	54(17.3%)	83(26.6%)	151(48.4%)	12(3.8%)
My company is supportive of employees who want to switch to less demanding jobs for private reasons.	24(7.7%)	89(28.5%)	105(33.7%)	88(28.2%)	6(1.9%)
If necessary, employees within this company are expected to prioritize their work over their private situation. (R)	9(2.9%)	36(11.5%)	106(34.0%)	127(40.7%)	34(10.9%)
In order to be taken seriously in this company, employees should work long days and be available all the time. (R)	11(3.5%)	46(14.7%)	104(33.3%)	120(38.5%)	31(9.9%)
In this company, employees who [temporarily] reduce their working hours for private reasons are considered less ambitious. (R)	15(4.8%)	62(19.9%)	128(41%)	94(30.1%)	13(4.2%)
Employees who turn down a promotion because of private circumstances will suffer negative career consequences within this company. (R)	8(2.6%)	32(10.3%)	117(37.5%)	130(41.7%)	25(8.0%)
My line manager supports employees who want to switch to a less demanding job because of their private situation.	8(4.57%)	37(21.14%)	59(33.71%)	66(37.71%)	5(2.86%)
My line manager supports employees who (temporarily) want to reduce their working hours for private reasons.	12(3.8%)	32(10.3%)	77(24.7%)	179(57.4%)	14(4.5%)

My colleagues support employees who temporarily want to reduce their working hours for private reasons.	4(1.3%)	22(7.1%)	87(27.9%)	189(57.7%)	19(6.1%)
My colleagues help me out if I am having a hard time coping with my caregiving responsibilities.	16(5.1%)	46(14.7%)	136(44.6%)	108(34.6%)	6(1.9%)

Section 4 Job performance

The section below expects to find out some information about the performance of responsibilities and duties of your job.

12. To what extent do you agree with the following statements while performing your job? (Williams and Anderson, 1991; Lynch et al., 1999)

Statement	Strong disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I adequately complete assigned duties	0(0.0%)	2(0.6%)	23(7.4%)	199(63.8%)	88(28.2%)
I meet formal performance requirements of the job	0(0.0%)	5(1.6%)	26(8.3%)	208(66.7%)	73(23.4%)
I don't neglect aspects of the job that I am obligated to perform	0(0.0%)	2(0.6%)	20(6.4%)	202(64.7%)	88(28.2%)
I fulfill responsibilities specified in the job description	2(0.6%)	1(0.3%)	4(1.3%)	195(62.5%)	110(35.3%)
I engage in activities that can positively affect my performance evaluation (R)	2(0.6%)	6(1.9%)	63(20.2%)	190(60.9%)	51(16.3%)
I perform tasks that are expected of me	0(0.0%)	7(2.2%)	35(11.2%)	199(63.8%)	71(22.8%)
I can make constructive suggestions to the overall functioning of my work group	1(0.3%)	2(0.6%)	33(10.6%)	204(65.4%)	72(23.1%)
I encourage others to try new and more effective ways of doing their jobs	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	9(2.9%)	212(67.9%)	91(29.2%)
I am well informed where opinion might benefit the organisation	1(0.3%)	11(3.5%)	61(19.6%)	189(60.6%)	50(16.0%)
I continue to look for new ways to improve the effectiveness of my work	0(0.0%)	1(0.3%)	22(7.1%)	209(67.0%)	80(25.6%)

Section 5- Personal characteristics

Please answer the following questions by choosing or filling the most appropriate answer in the box.

13. How would you describe your gender?

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
Male	1	146 (46.8%)
Female	2	166 (53.2%)
Total responses		312

14. How old are you?

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
under 25 years old	1	49 (15.7%)
26-35 years old	2	196 (62.8%)
36-45 years old	3	48 (15.4%)
46-55 years old	4	19 (6.1%)
Over 56 years old	5	0 (0%)
Total responses		312

15. What is your highest educational attainment?

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
High School or under	1	0 (0%)
College	2	58 (18.6%)
Bachelor Degree	3	188 (60.3%)
Master Degree	4	62 (19.9%)
Doctoral Degree	5	4 (1.3%)
Total responses		312

16. How long for your job tenure?

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
Under 2 years	1	48 (15.4%)
2-5 years	2	125 (40.1%)
6-10 years	3	63 (20.2%)
11-20years	4	46 (14.7%)

Over 20 years	5	30 (9.6%)
Total responses		312

17. What is your job level:

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
Grass-roots	1	125 (40.1%)
Junior	2	111 (35.6%)
Middle	3	67 (21.5%)
Senior	4	9 (2.9%)
Total responses		312

18. What is your marital status?

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
Single	1	147 (47.1%)
Married	2	165 (52.9%)
Total responses		312

19. The number of children you support or maintain:

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
0	1	181 (58%)
1	2	120 (38.5%)
2	3	11 (3.5%)
More than 2	4	0 (0%)
Total responses		312

19.1 The age of your youngest kid:

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
Under 3 years old	1	48(15.4%)
3-6 years old	2	27(8.7%)
7-12 years old	3	23(7.4%)
13-18 years old	4	24(7.7%)
Over 18 years old	5	9 (2.9%)
Total responses		131

20. The number of elderly you support or maintain:

	Code numbers in SPSS	N (%)
0	1	98 (31.4%)
1-2	2	132 (42.3%)
3-4	3	77 (24.7%)
More than 5	4	5 (1.6%)
Total responses		312

Appendix C: Indicative interview questions

Section 1 The understanding of work-life balance (WLB) and your work-life balance experience

1. What do you think of the WLB?
2. To what extent do you think you (your employee) could achieve WLB and Why?
3. What factors impact the employees' WLB?
4. Can you think of any work-related outcomes (e.g. job performance) that are related to your WLB? What would the WLB impact be for individuals? What would the WLB be for the organisation?

Section 2 Approaches to work-life management (WLBPPs and WLB context)

5. Are there any labour legislation and social policies related to your WLB? Are these regulations and policies available in your organisation? Are you happy with the implementation?
6. Does your organisation have any practices or initiatives that impact employees' WLB?
7. Why/how do you think your organisation designed these practices?
8. How do these policies and practices work (implementing procedure)? Can you give me any example?
9. Whether and to what extent do you use these policies and practices?
10. Do you find these policies and practices are effective for your WLB, and job performance respectively? and Why?
11. Do you find these policies and practices are effective for your organisational development? and Why?

12. Do you find any contextual factors that impact your WLB in your workplace?
13. How do the roles of employer, your line managers, and colleagues impact on your WLB? In what way?
14. Do you find any of these supports are effective for your WLB? and Why?
15. Do you find any of these supports enhance your job performance? and Why?

Appendix D: Survey and Interview consent process/forms

Survey information & Consent process

This will be the first screen that participants see who are directed to the survey by the email link. If they proceed to submit the survey they are deemed to have provided informed consent to participate; but that they can exit the survey at any point prior to the final 'submit' click point and they will have been deemed to have withdrawn consent.

Study Title: The work-life balance of white-collar employees: A case study of a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in urban China.

Invitation

You are being invited to take part a research project examining employee work-life balance, undertaken by Mengyi Xu as part of her doctoral studies at Keele University. The aim of the research to undertake an online survey of members to examine current working hours, workloads and the implications of these for members' work-life balance.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve.

Aims of the Research

The present study contributes to research on work-life balance by assessing the current situations, perceptions and expectations of white-collar employees in a well-recognised SOE [**Case Study Organisation**] in China.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to take part in this project as an employee of [**Case Organisation**] where the researcher is conducting part of her doctoral research with the support of the organisation's management.

Do I have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. The first web page will outline the aims of the survey and deal with the ethical issues of why the person has to been invited to participate, the aims and potential use of the survey and a statement clarifying that those employees continuing to submit the survey will have deemed to have consented to participate. You may withdraw from the survey at any point prior to the final 'submit' click point. When you get to the end of the survey and click 'submit' then consent will be assumed that you will not be able to withdraw from the study because the survey is anonymous. If you withdraw the survey prior to this, any data collected will not be stored and included in the analysis and subsequent reporting of the findings.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be given a web-based anonymous questionnaire survey to complete, which should take around 15 minutes. The questionnaire will expect you to fill in your personal views and experiences as honestly and openly as possible about work-related issues by clicking items. It is made clear to you that this is an anonymous survey and you will not be identifiable if they do submit survey responses. All questionnaires will be securely kept confidential.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?

You will get a chance to provide information on your current working conditions and potentially influence future employment policy within [Case Organisation].

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?

There are no substantive risks involved in this project. All the information you give us will be anonymised and we will not use the information in any way that might cause you harm. Even where personal characteristics could identify an individual, they not be used as the basis for analysis value (would be grouped into a larger variable) or not used (too small a sample size) for multivariate analysis.

When completing the survey you should, however, exercise care to avoid any sensitive or confidential material in your responses. When reporting any findings, the researcher will ensure that potentially sensitive or confidential issues are not reported.

How will information about me be used?

The research undertaken will be presented as part of the researcher's PhD thesis. The research may also be written up for publication in academic journals.

Who will have access to information about me?

Only the researcher Mengyi Xu and her doctoral supervisor, Dr. Steve French, will have access to information about you.

How will the data be secured?

- Initially, these data will be securely stored on a password protected laptop. Then, the data will be uploaded to the secure Keele University server and deleted from the laptop on a daily basis during this fieldwork and will also be stored the same way on the researcher's return to Keele University.
- Information on you will be kept confidential and anonymous. This means that the researcher will protect your identity as a participant by ensuring that you remain unidentifiable in the survey. Your survey responses are sent over a secure, SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) encrypted connection to guarantee data security. The

'Anonymous response' has been set up to prevent IP tracking. Any data which is guaranteed by "Wenjuanxin" which could possibly identify participants will be deleted immediately on the completion of survey.

- In accordance with Keele University guidelines, the data from this study will be securely retained and stored by the principal investigator – Mengyi Xu until completion of the PhD. After this period of storage, the data will be securely disposed in line with university ethical code of practice.

Who is funding and organising the research?

This research is independent and has no third-party funding other than Keele University.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please do not hesitate to contact the lead researcher who will do his best to answer your questions.

Mengyi Xu

E-mail: m.xu1@keele.ac.uk

Telephone: 0086 13320522528 (CN) /0044 7851099925(UK)

Alternatively, you can contact the researcher's supervisor at Keele University:

Dr. Steve French

E-mail: s.r.french@keele.ac.uk

Telephone: 0044 1782 733609

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:

Nicola Leighton

Research Governance Officer

Directorate of Engagement and Partnerships

IC2 Building

Keele University

ST5 5NH

E-mail: [n.leighton@ keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.leighton@keele.ac.uk)

Tel: 0044 1782 733306

Thank you for your time and effort.

Yours sincerely

Mengyi Xu

This will be the screen that members see when they have completed the survey.

Thank you for completing the survey

Can we also take this opportunity to remind you that:

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please do not hesitate to contact the lead researcher who will do her best to answer your questions.

Mengyi Xu

E-mail: m.xu1@keele.ac.uk

Telephone: 0086 13320522528 (CN) /0044 7851099925(UK)

Alternatively, you can contact the researcher's supervisor at Keele University:

Dr. Steve French

E-mail: s.r.french@keele.ac.uk

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IC2 Building

Keele University

ST5 5NH

E-mail: [n.leighton@ keele.ac.uk](mailto:n.leighton@keele.ac.uk)

Tel: 0044 1782 733306

When participants get to the end of the survey and click 'submit' then consent will be assumed that participants will not be able to withdraw from the study because the survey is anonymous.

Interview consent form I

Title of Project: The work-life balance of white-collar employees: A case study of a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in urban China

Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:

Mengyi XU

Centre of Economics and Management

C/o Keele Management School

Keele University

Keele, ST5 5BG

m.xu1@keele.ac.uk

0086 13320522528 (CN) /0044 7851099925(UK)

Please tick the box if you
agree with the statement

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 31st Aug 2016 (version no 4) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the interview without giving any reason.
3. I agree to take part in this study.
4. I agree this interview will be audio recorded.

Participant signature

Date

Researcher signature

Date

Interview consent form II
(for use of quotes)

Title of Project: The work-life balance of white-collar employees: A case study of a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in urban China

Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:

Mengyi XU

Centre of Economics and Management

c/o Keele Management School

Keele University

Keele, ST5 5BG

m.xu1@keele.ac.uk

0086 13320522528 (CN) /0044 7851099925(UK)

Please tick the box if you
agree with the statement

1. I agree to the interview being audio recorded used.

2. I agree for my anonymised quotes to be used.

Participant signature

Date

Researcher signature

Date

Appendix E: Interviewees' personal information

No.	Gender	Age range (y/o)	Marital status	Childcare number And age(y/o)	Elderly care number	Education	Identity	Job position	Job responsibility
A1	Male	36-45	Married	0	2	Master	Manager Professional/Skilled	Middle	Performance & pay
a2	Female	26-35	Married	1 4	4	Master	Employee Skilled	Junior	Talent training & development
A3	Female	36-45	Married	1 16	4	Bachelor	Manager Skilled	Middle	Communist & Union
a4	Female	26-35	Married	1 1	4	Bachelor	Employee Skilled	Junior	Training & development
a5	Male	26-35	Married	1 3	4	Bachelor	Employee Skilled	Junior	Regional sales
A6	Female	26-35	Married	1 4	4	Bachelor	Manager Skilled	Middle	HRBP
A7	Female	46-55	Married	1 18+	2	Bachelor	Manager Skilled/Technical	Middle	Quality management
A8	Male	36-45	Married	1 10	4	College	Manager Technical	Middle	Workshop management
a9	Male	26-35	Single	0	0	Bachelor	Employee Skilled	Junior	Project management
A10	Female	46-55	Married	1 18+	4	Bachelor	Manager Skilled/Technical	Middle	Equipment & engineering management

A11	Female	36-45	Married	1 6	4	Bachelor	Manager Skilled	Middle	Sales management
B1	Female	46-55	Married	1 18+	2	Bachelor	Manager Professional/Skilled	Senior	COO
b2	Female	26-35	Married	0	0	Master	Employee Skilled	Junior	PA to CEO
B3	Male	46-55	Married	1 18+	3	Bachelor	Manager Professional/Skilled	Middle	HR Employee relationship
B4	Female	46-55	Married	1 18+	2	Bachelor	Manager Professional/Skilled	Middle	Union leader
B5	Male	46-55	Married	1 18+	2	Bachelor	Manager Professional/Skilled	Middle	Communist party leader
B6	Female	46-55	Married	1 18+	3	Bachelor	Manager Professional/Skilled	Middle	Project manager
B7	Female	36-45	Married	2 1	4	Bachelor	Manager Professional/Skilled	Middle	HR-Welfare and social security
b8	Male	26-35	Married	0	4	Bachelor	Employee Skilled	Junior	Business operation
b9	Female	46-55	Married	1 18+	2	Bachelor	Employee Skilled	Junior	Archives management
b10	Male	26-35	Single	0	0	Bachelor	Employee Skilled	(fairly) Junior	Auditing
B11	Female	46-55	Married	1 18+	2	Bachelor	Manager Professional/technica 1	Middle	R&D
b12	Female	36-45	Married	2 3	4	Doctor	Employee Skilled/technical	Junior	R&D