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Chinese overtime culture among white-collar workers in the first-tier cities

Abstract

The Chinese economic reform did not launch only astonishing economic development but also gave birth to a phenomenon of overtime work. For many white-collar workers in the Chinese megacities long working hours became an inseparable part of their working life, an unwritten rule, that mostly is in contradiction with their written work contracts. Since 2006, the spread of overtime work started to be referred to as “overtime culture” (加班文化 *jiābān wénhuà*) and formed part of the corporate cultures of Chinese companies. The aim of this paper is to provide a complex analysis of the overtime culture as well as an answer to the research question of why the overtime culture is so widely accepted. Reasons and motivations of white-collar workers to accept the extensively long working hours include specific aspects of the Chinese culture, career development, conditions on the job market, low work effectivity, survival pressure in the Chinese megacities and the new function of the workplace as a social interaction site for young professionals.

Introduction

Since the time of the Chinese economic reform, the so-called Reform and Opening-up (改革开放 *gǎigé-kāifàng*) in 1978, the Chinese working environment has undergone immense changes. Transition of the Chinese planned economy into the capitalism-based economy termed «socialism with Chinese characteristics» has been a successful project that keeps on ensuring continuous economic growth. One of the unseen reasons for this unprecedented economic growth, being called the “Chinese miracle”, is intensive overtime work. As a by-product of the unceasing development of the Chinese economy, the phenomenon of overtime started to spread widely among white-collar workers in the Chinese megacities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, known as the “first-tier cities” (一线城市 *yīxiàn chéngshì*). This phenomenon is often referred to as

* Renmin University of China.

“overtime culture” (加班文化 *jiābān wénhuà*). Although there is a growing body of research on the overtime phenomenon not only in China but also abroad, the research that has been done so far neglects the aspect of a positive impact of overtime culture on the lives of white-collar workers in the first-tier cities. Given the great lifestyle differences between the first-tier, second-tier, third-tier cities and the rural areas of China, only the first-tier cities are taken into consideration. In the first-tier cities overtime work is most common, as these are the most developed areas of China where the pace of life is the fastest and progressive but demanding job opportunities are plentiful.

The aim of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of overtime culture in China. We try to answer the following questions: What are the reasons and motivations for white-collar workers in China’s megacities to accept the overtime culture? Is the overall impact on their working time and work-life balance exclusively negative or does it have positive aspects as well?

Since the time of the Chinese economic reform, the so-called Reform and Opening-up (改革开放 *gǎi gé kāi fàng*) in 1978, the Chinese working environment has undergone immense changes. Transition of the Chinese planned economy into the capitalism-based economy termed «socialism with Chinese characteristics» has been a successful project that keeps on ensuring continuous economic growth. One of the unseen reasons for this unprecedented economic growth, being called the “Chinese miracle”, is intensive overtime work¹. As a by-product of the unceasing development of the Chinese economy, the phenomenon of overtime started to spread widely among white-collar workers in the Chinese megacities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, known as the “first-tier cities” (一线城市 *yī xiàn chéng shì*). This phenomenon is often referred to as “overtime culture” (加班文化 *jiābān wénhuà*). Although there is a growing body of research on the overtime phenomenon not only in China but also abroad, the research that has been done so far neglects the aspect of a positive impact of overtime culture on the lives of white-collar workers in the first-tier cities. Given the great lifestyle differences between the first-tier, second-tier, third-tier cities and the rural areas of

¹ Lai Desheng, Meng Dahu and Wang Qi, ‘Woguo laodongzhe gongzuo shijian tezheng yu zhengce xuanze’ [Specifics of Labourers’ Working Time and Policy Choice in China], *Zhongguo laodong* 2015, Vol. 2, p. 36.

China, only the first-tier cities are taken into consideration. In the first-tier cities overtime work is most common, as these are the most developed areas of China where the pace of life is the fastest and progressive but demanding job opportunities are plentiful.

The aim of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of overtime culture in China. We try to answer the following questions: What are the reasons and motivations for white-collar workers in China's megacities to accept the overtime culture? Is the overall impact on their working time and work-life balance exclusively negative or does it have positive aspects as well?

Existing studies on overtime and overtime culture

As for the research done by Chinese scholars, overtime, as well as death from overwork (过劳死 guòláosǐ, also termed *karōshi*²), remained fairly unnoticed in China until 2006, when the death of a 25-year old developer, who was working for the telecommunication company Huawei, triggered an extensive debate on overtime and *karōshi* both in academia and among the public. Since then, Chinese researchers started to reflect on the overtime work from all kinds of perspectives. The main concern of the first number of research studies was the mattress culture and the emerging overtime culture. Researchers based their works mainly on statistical data, while some of them used qualitative data from interviews with white-collar workers. These research works are concerned with the issues such as how overtime culture is being put into practice³, the causes and countermeasures of overtime culture⁴, analysis of the mattress culture, as well as the unwritten rules character of the

² In 2002, the Japanese word *karōshi* made it into the Oxford English Dictionary, adding to the few Japanese words used in English compared to the extremely long list of katakana written English words in Japanese. *Karōshi* (过劳死), being defined as “death brought by overwork” or “job-related exhaustion”, made it also into Chinese as a direct translation from Japanese, namely *guòláosǐ* (过劳死).

³ Li Dongjie, ‘Jiaban wenhua cheng zhichang qianguize’ [Overtime Culture is Becoming an Unwritten Rule at Workplace], *Renmin luntan* 2006, Vol. 13, p. 32-33.

⁴ Liang Ping and Li Yan, ‘Jiexi xianzai qiye jiaban wenhua de chengyin he duice’ [Analysis on the Causes and Countermeasures of Overtime Culture in Modern Chinese Enterprises], *Jingji luntan*, 2007, Vol. 7, p. 73-76.

overtime culture.⁵⁶ The research of Wei Huawei analyzes the overtime culture from the perspective of overtime being a good tool to win the company's respect of their workers and on how the overtime could be integrated into the corporate culture.⁷ A few years later, the research "Study on Overtime Phenomenon and Overtime Regulations" was published, which analyzes the implementation of Chinese labour law and its impact on overtime work as well as overtime pay.⁸

Karōshi and overtime work in general attracted the attention of a number of researchers.^{9 10 11 12 13} As the overtime culture developed and underwent changes, there were developments in the field of the overtime research as well. Later studies provide a cultural perspective on overtime work¹⁴, examine the overtime phenomenon from both the employer's and employee's point of view¹⁵, criticise the inevitability of overtime¹⁶, examine the relation between different ranks within a company and the

⁵ Gao Lu, 'Shei lai zhiyue kepa de 'jiaban wenhua'' [Who Will Restrain the Terrible "Overtime Culture"?], *Zhongguo shehui qikan*, 2006, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 24-25.

⁶ Ou Shi, 'Fansi jiaban wenhua' [Reflecting on the Overtime Culture], *Qiye wenhua*, 2007, Vol. 5, p. 9-10.

⁷ Wei Huawei, 'Ruhe rang 'jiabanwenhua' shangsheng wei qiye jingshen' [How to Upgrade "Overtime Culture" to the Corporate Spirit], *Jingyingzhe : Shangye Guanliban*, 2006, Vol. 14, p. 92-93.

⁸ Lou Na, 'Jiaban xianxiang ji jiaban guiding yanjiu' [Study on Overtime Phenomenon and Overtime Regulations], *Zhongguo renli ziyuan kaifa*, 2009, Vol. 4, p. 72-74.

⁹ Bi Ruilin, 'Zhongguo de 'guolaosi' xianzhuang' [Chinese Death from Overwork Phenomenon], *Renli ziyuan*, 2006, Vol. 10, No. 3, p. 42.

¹⁰ Ren Fangfang, 'Zhongguo de 'guolaosi' xianzhuang ji yuanyin fenxi' [Current Situation and Analysis of Reasons Leading to 'Karoshi' in China], *Dongfang qiye wenhua*, 2011, Vol. 10, p. 146.

¹¹ J. Li, Z. Yang, A. Loerbroks and P. Angerer, 'Compensation for disease-caused sudden death at work in China 2006–2012', *Occupational and environmental medicine*, 2014, Vol. 71, No. 9, p. 661.

¹² Wang Duyu, 'Lunlun 'guolaosi' xianxiang zhong de ziyuan jiaban nanti' [Problematics of Voluntary Overtime Work and the Phenomenon of 'karoshi'], *Fazhi yu shehui*, 2017, Vol. 3, p. 297-298.

¹³ Ren Fangfang, 'Zhongguo de 'guolaosi' xianzhuang ji yuanyin fenxi' [Current Situation and Analysis of Reasons Leading to 'Karoshi' in China], *Dongfang qiye wenhua*, 2011, Vol. 10, p. 146.

¹⁴ Yu Weiyu, 'Wenhua shijiao xikan jiaban' [Overtime as Seen from the Cultural Perspective], *Shichang luntan*, 2011, Vol. 5, p. 38-39.

¹⁵ Gao Jie, 'Qiye chaoshi jiaban wenti de shensi' [Reflection on the Problematics of Overtime in Companies], *Qiye guan cha*, 2011, Vol. 1, p. 96-97.

¹⁶ Yi Ming, 'Jiaban zu de ku yu le' [The Joys and Sorrows of Overtimers], *Mishu zhi you*, 2012, Vol. 9, p. 43-45.

amount of overtime work¹⁷ and impact of overtime on one's health.¹⁸ There is also a comparison research on overtime pay in China, Japan, Great Britain, France and the United States.¹⁹ A number of studies focus also on the latest developments and trends within the overtime culture²⁰²¹²²²³.

Research done by the English-speaking academic world takes a slightly different perspective on the overtime phenomenon. A number of researchers focus on various aspects of overtime remuneration, attracting the realm of corporate social responsibility²⁴, working time, standardization and flexibilisation of work²⁵²⁶, approaches of

¹⁷ Qi Shi, 'Lingdao jibie yue gao, jiaban shijian jiu yue chang?' [The Higher the Position, the Longer the Overtime?], *Lingdao wencui*, 2016, Vol. 15, p. 75-77.

¹⁸ Xia Yi, "'Jiaban' yu 'jiankang' nei ge shi genben' ["Overtime" and "Health" - Which One is Essential], *Jiuye yu baozhang*, 2016, Vol. 11, p. 37-39.

¹⁹ Yi Shan, 'Woguo yu guowai jiaban buchang zhidu mianmian guan' [Face to Face with the Compensation System for Overtime in China and Abroad], *Zhongguo gonghui caihui*, 2016, Vol. 3, p. 39-40.

²⁰ Huang Shuomin, 'Women weihe jiaban' [Why We Work Overtime], *Jiuye yu baozhang*, 2016, Vol. 9, p. 8-10.

²¹ Lin Pingshan, 'Jiaban: yuan huo bu yuan, ta dou zai na li' [Overtime: It Is Still There Whether You Want or Not], *Jiuye yu baozhang*, 2016, Vol. 9, p. 11-14.

²² Liu Dongxia, 'Jianyi zhongguo qiye quangong jiaban wenti' [Discussion on Overtime Work of Chinese Companies' Workers], *Jueceyuxinxi*, 2016, Vol. 9, p. 171.

²³ Shi Ji, "'996' gongzuozhi ni shoudeliao ma?' [Can You Stand the "996" Work System?], *Jianghuai fazhi*, 2016, Vol. 20, p. 42-43.

²⁴ Hilary Murdoch and Daniella Gould, 'Corporate social responsibility in China: Mapping the environment', *A study commission by the Global Alliance for Communities and Workers*, 2004.

²⁵ Xiangquan Zeng, Lu Liang and Umar Idris Sa'ad, '*Working time in transition: the dual task of standardization and flexibilization in China*', International Labor Office, 2005, p. 7-27.

²⁶ V. Mishra and R. Smyth, 'Work Hours in Chinese Enterprises: Evidence from Matched Employer-employee Data', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 2012, Vol. 44, No. 1, p. 57-77.

organizations and individuals towards overtime²⁷²⁸, compensation management for overtime work²⁹ and illegal overtime.³⁰

Another kind of overtime related research compares working time and overtime around the world, these include comparison of working hours across 22 different countries³¹, comparison of working time and related policies around the world³², convergence of working overtime in East Asia³³, comparison of the involvement of collective bargaining in setting working time in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden and its implication on China³⁴, comparison of working hours and its relation to happiness in East Asia³⁵ and a research on Confucian motives to work overtime in Asian organizations.^{36 37 38 39}

Many English-writing scholars also reflect the *karōshi* and issues related to it such as its compensation, work stress and the high occurrence

²⁷ R. J. Burke, 'Working to Live or Living to Work: Should Individuals and Organizations Care?', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2009, Vol. 84, No. 2, p. 167-172.

²⁸ E. Friedman and C. K. Lee, 'Remaking the world of Chinese labour: A 30-year retrospective', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2010, Vol. 48, No. 3, p. 507-533.

²⁹ H. Tang and J. I. N. Zhengwei, 'Research of Overwork Problem on Simple Laborers From the Visual of Compensation Management', *Canadian Social Science*, 2016, Vol. 12, No. 8, p. 91-95.

³⁰ S. Kim and S. Chung, 'Explaining organizational responsiveness to emerging regulatory pressure: the case of illegal overtime in China', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 2016, Vol. 27, No. 18, p. 2097-2118.

³¹ H. Stier and N. Lewin-Epstein, 'Time to work: A comparative analysis of preferences for working hours', *Work and Occupations*, 2003, Vol. 30, No. 3, p. 302-326.

³² Jon C. Messenger, Sangheon Lee and Deirdre McCann, *Working time around the world: Trends in working hours, laws, and policies in a global comparative perspective*, Routledge, 2007.

³³ M. C. Tsai, M. Nitta, S. W. Kim et al., 'Working overtime in East Asia: convergence or divergence?', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2016, Vol. 4, p. 1-23.

³⁴ X. Li, 'A Comparative Research on the Involvement of Collective Bargaining in Setting Working Time across Four EU Countries and Its Implication on China', *US-China L. Rev.*, 2016, Vol. 13, p. 796-808.

³⁵ T. Yamashita, A. R. Bardo, D. Liu, 'Are East Asians happy to work more or less? Associations between working hours, relative income and happiness in China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan', *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 2016, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 264-274.

³⁶ Huang Shuomin, 'Women weihe jiaiban' [Why We Work Overtime], *Jiuye yu baozhang*, 2016, Vol. 9, p. 8-10.

³⁷ Lin Pingshan, 'Jiaiban: yuan huo bu yuan, ta dou zai na li' [Overtime: It Is Still There Whether You Want or Not], *Jiuye yu baozhang*, 2016, Vol. 9, p. 11-14.

³⁸ Liu Dongxia, 'Jianyi zhongguo qiye quangong jiaiban wenti' [Discussion on Overtime Work of Chinese Companies' Workers], *Jueceyuxinxi*, 2016, Vol. 9, p. 171.

³⁹ Shi Ji, "'996' gongzuozhi ni shouldeliao ma?' [Can You Stand the "996" Work System?], *Jianghuai fazhi*, 2016, Vol. 20, p. 42-43.

of karōshi among doctors. A high number of studies focuses on the work-life balance such as the Work-Life in China study which analyzes the cultural reasons leading to the conflict between work and life , overtime and psychological well-being among Chinese office workers⁴⁰, social policies and employer strategies linked to the work-life balance in China⁴¹ and in the 2017 the book *The Routledge Companion to Wellbeing at Work* was published. This publication contains a chapter named Long working hours and presenteeism in Asia which provides an extensive overview of the definition of overtime in different countries and concerns the long working hours in Confucian Asia, Chinese self-efficacy and Chinese self-consciousness as the factors influencing the overtime behavior.

However research that analyzes not only the negative impacts of the overtime culture in first-tier cities but also its possible positive aspects on the lives of white-collar workers are scarce. This article aims to provide a better and more complex understanding of the overtime phenomenon in China and fill in the void in the existing research, which does not examine the overtime phenomenon from the perspective of being of a benefit to white-collar workers.

Karōshi and overtime work in general attracted the attention of a number of researchers. As the overtime culture developed and underwent changes, there were developments in the field of the overtime research as well. Later studies provide a cultural perspective on overtime work , examine the overtime phenomenon from both the employer's and employee's point of view , criticise the inevitability of overtime , examine the relation between different ranks within a company and the amount of overtime work and impact of overtime on one's health. There is also a comparison research on overtime pay in China, Japan, Great Britain, France and the United States. A number of studies focus also on the latest developments and trends within the overtime culture.

Research done by the English-speaking academic world takes a slightly different perspective on the overtime phenomenon. A number of researchers focus on various aspects of overtime remuneration, attracting the realm of corporate social responsibility, working time, standardization

⁴⁰ J. Houdmont, Jieming Zhou and J. Hassard, 'Overtime and psychological well-being among Chinese office workers', *Occupational medicine*, 2011, Vol. 61, No.4, p. 270-273.

⁴¹ Y. Xiao and F. L. Cooke, 'Work-life balance in China? Social policy, employer strategy and individual coping mechanisms', *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 2012, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 6-22.

and flexibilisation of work, approaches of organizations and individuals towards overtime, compensation management for overtime work and illegal overtime.

Another kind of overtime related research compares working time and overtime around the world, these include comparison of working hours across 22 different countries , comparison of working time and related policies around the world , convergence of working overtime in East Asia , comparison of the involvement of collective bargaining in setting working time in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden and its implication on China , comparison of working hours and its relation to happiness in East Asia and a research on Confucian motives to work overtime in Asian organizations.

Many English-writing scholars also reflect the *karōshi* and issues related to it such as its compensation , work stress and the high occurrence of *karōshi* among doctors. A high number of studies focuses on the work-life balance such as the Work-Life in China study which analyzes the cultural reasons leading to the conflict between work and life⁴², overtime and psychological well-being among Chinese office workers , social policies and employer strategies linked to the work-life balance in China and in the 2017 the book *The Routledge Companion to Wellbeing at Work* was published. This publication contains a chapter named Long working hours and presenteeism in Asia⁴³ which provides an extensive overview of the definition of overtime in different countries and concerns the long working hours in Confucian Asia, Chinese self-efficacy and Chinese self-consciousness as the factors influencing the overtime behavior.

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⁴² G. Russell and M. Ross, *Work-Life in China*, *Boston College Center for Work & Family Global Workforce Roundtable USA*, 2008, p. 1-52.

⁴³ Luo Lu and Chun-Yi Chou, 'Long working hours and presenteeism in Asia' in *The Routledge Companion to Wellbeing at Work*, C. L. Cooper and M. P. Leiter (eds.), Taylor & Francis, 2017, p. 135-142.

Research methodology

This research paper makes use of literature review and secondary analysis of data from a reliable variety of sources. As the official data are oftentimes not available in China, this research is supported by data originating from sources such as the Chinese job sites Zhaopin and China HRD, financial services company Ernst & Young, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, financial analytics provider Trading Economics and the American National Bureau of Economic Research. The review of statistical data from different sources shall ensure reliable and credible bases for the research statements and conclusions.

Backgrounds and trends of the overtime culture

Overtime work serves companies well in terms of being provided more human capital for the same costs and therefore staying competitive on the rapidly developing and turbulently changing Chinese market.⁴⁴ It has been especially so during the last ten years when extensive work hours became a norm, an unwritten rule (潜规则 *qiánguīzé*) that expects workers to leave their working places hours later than as written, despite what the employment contract states.^{45,46} In contrast to workers in other professional sectors such as blue-collars or pink-collars, white-collar workers are usually not paid per hour of work. Therefore, it became an increasingly popular practice of employers to demand extra unpaid hours of work from their white-collar employees.⁴⁷ Due to the spread of mandatory social and medical insurance, employers are facing increasingly higher human capital costs⁴⁸, which effect the number of jobs available on the job market as well as the volume of work that every employee needs to complete. As a result, fierce competition between both companies and individuals⁴⁹ only fuels these extensively long working hours. According to the Chinese law, overtime work refers to all work that exceeds the daily working time of eight hours and overtime work should not be longer than three hours a day or more than 36 hours a

⁴⁴ Ren Fangfang, *Current Situation and Analysis...*, p. 146.

⁴⁵ Li Dongjie, *Overtime Culture is Becoming...*, p. 32.

⁴⁶ Xia Yi, "Overtime" and "Health" ..., p. 37.

⁴⁷ Lou Na, *Study on Overtime...*, p. 72.

⁴⁸ Wang Rengui, 'Quanmian kandai laodongli chengben shangsheng' [Comprehensive View on Raising Labour Costs], *Liaowang*, 2016, Vol. 50, p. 50.

⁴⁹ Gao Jie, *Reflection on the Problematics...*, p. 96.

month.⁵⁰ However, similar to the working time stated in employment contracts, this government regulation does not correspond to the practice.⁵¹

The cause of this situation is very low fines to employers who would violate this regulation. Firstly, for extension of workers' working hours, a company only gets a warning from the Labour and Social Security Administration and is required to rectify the working hours and to pay a fine of 100 to 500 RMB per worker (between 12 and 60 €). In comparison with the profits the company gains through overtime work, a few hundred yuan fine is but a drop in the ocean. This policy is therefore not proving itself effective, as it does not change anything about the employers' demands for long working hours.⁵²

It is since approximately 2006 when the Chinese public and academia started to refer to long working hours as an overtime culture. The rise of the overtime culture is to be explained by the increased need of employers to justify the extortionate working hours. The term has emerged at the same time as the term "mattress culture" (床垫文化 *chuángdiàn wénhuà*), which is unique to the corporate culture of the networking and telecommunications company Huawei. Use of mattresses by developers in Huawei, however, already dated back to the year 1988 when the company was established. Huawei explains that "mattress culture" is a symbol of Huawei's spirit, implying that their employees strive to provide the maximum of their skills and intelligence.⁵³ However, it was only after the tragic death of a merely 25-year-old software developer from Huawei's Shenzhen's branch that the practice of providing a mattress to all developers in order to maximise their time at work-desks got infamously known to the wider audience.⁵⁴ No other Chinese enterprises got known for applying the very same model of mattress culture, however cases of not only IT developers but also workers from other industries spending their nights sleeping on their office desks, camp beds or couches are a commonplace practice in the Chinese megacities.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Yu Weiyu, *Overtime as Seen from...*, p. 38.

⁵¹ Lou Na, *Study on Overtime...*, p. 72.

⁵² Zhang Fengyi, 'Ezhi "jiabanwenhua" waiyi xia de liyi chongdong' [Containing the 'Overtime Culture' under the Cover of Seeking Profit], *Dangdai guangxi*, 2014, Vol. 9, p. 7.

⁵³ Gao Lu, *Who Will Restrain...*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Ou Shi, *Reflecting on the Overtime...*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Qi Shi, *The Higher the Position...*, p. 76.

Overtime culture was initially applied by the start-up companies (创业公司 *chuàngyè gōngsī*) in the internet industry, which is characterised by both splendid business opportunities and, since the last 20 years, rapidly growing and escalating competition.⁵⁶ Innovative ideas provided by great talents who put in extra-long working hours are the prevailing formula for success. It is fore mostly the young and motivated workforce that believes in profitability and the meaningfulness of long working hours, as they can ensure the growth of the company's business and, as a result, also their own salaries and provide interesting opportunities for career development.⁵⁷ Consequently, the overtime culture got incorporated into the company cultures of not only start-ups but also already established enterprises. For instance, employees of the Chinese web services company Baidu are working very hard because their performance assessment is based on finished workload, which also forms a basis prerequisite for promotion.⁵⁸

Overtime work being part of the company culture is oftentimes presented as a necessary tool for both the employee and his or her company to achieve the desired market share and personal growth. A favourable social atmosphere for long working hours originating in both families and public opinion, shaped the overtime culture into an unwritten rule that could be very difficult to reverse.⁵⁹ Following the example of successful Chinese start-up companies such as smartphones producer Xiaomi or taxi services company Didi Chuxing, social acceptance of overtime culture has risen dramatically.

Furthermore, IT and internet industry are being known for having the most demanding working hours and making widespread use of the so called "996 working system" (996 工作制 *996 gōngzuòzhì*) which means working usually at least from 9am to 9pm, six days a week and without any overtime pay nor subsidy for either food or transport. For instance, employees of Huawei often work till 8 or 9pm, in busy periods till 12 o'clock and to finish work at 1am is also nothing exceptional. Companies like the technology start-up Xiaomi or the Beijing based e-

⁵⁶ Liu Dongxia, Discussion on Overtime..., p. 171.

⁵⁷ Huang Shuomin, Why We Work Overtime..., p. 10.

⁵⁸ Liu Dongxia, Discussion on Overtime..., p. 171.

⁵⁹ Gao Jie, Reflection on the Problematics..., p. 96.

commerce corporation Jingdong are also among those employing the 996 working system.⁶⁰

In 2015 China's biggest job site Zhaopin conducted research on the "Quality of the 8 hours of white-collar workers' lives". Along with the development of urbanisation, white-collar workers have become a considerable part of the population in Chinese cities and the aim of Zhaopin's research was to understand the quality of life of their life. The research areas included but were not limited to job satisfaction, work environment, office equipment, health at work and also overtime work. The survey is based on 13 400 valid questionnaires filled in by white-collar users of this job search website. Zhaopin's research appears to validate the view that overtime is an inevitable part of the white-collar workers' work. Only 28,6% of workers do not need to work overtime, 24,3% of respondents do 1-3 hours of overtime every week. For an average of 3-5 hours of weekly overtime, the result was 12,2% and for 5-10 hours, 12,8% of the white-collar workers. As much as 11% of respondents state that their average weekly overtime exceeds 20 hours. This last group of white-collar workers appears to be adopting the 996 working system. Based on the research findings, there are prominent differences across the industries. Workers active in IT, communications, electronics and internet industry work on average 9,3 hours of overtime every week, followed by real estate and construction industry with 7,1 hours of overtime and traffic, transport, logistics and warehousing with 6,8 hours of extra working hours per week. Next in terms of longest overwork hours performed by white-collar workers is held by the automotive, production, processing and manufacturing industries. Furthermore, the research findings show that there are also prominent differences depending on the position held in the company. White-collar workers in positions related to the product work are doing the longest overtime hours of all, namely 8,6 hours a week on average, followed by technology and research and development positions with overtime reaching 7,6 and 7,4 hours per week respectively. Jobs in design require average of 6,9 hours of overtime weekly.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Liu Dongxia, Discussion on Overtime..., p. 171.

⁶¹ Zhaopin, 'Baling 8 xiaoshi nei shengcun yali da, sancheng mei zhou jiaban chao 5 xiaoshi - 'zhilian zhaopin 2015 nian bailing 8 xiaoshi shengcun zhiliang diaoyan baogao' [8 Hours of White-collar Workers' Living Pressure, 30% of Them Work Overtime Every Week For Over 5 Hours - Zhaopin's 2015 Survey Report on the Quality of 8 Hours of White-collar

Based on Zhaopin's findings, as much as 71,4% of white-collar workers do work overtime, with intensity varying between 1 to over 20 hours of overtime weekly. These results provide confirmatory evidence that overtime culture has been indeed adopted across various industries and company positions and also shows that the number of workers following the extreme 996 working system is reaching 11%. All these results seem to be suggesting a simple question. Why is overtime culture so widely accepted?

Career development

The dynamics of Chinese business environment enables workers to experience fast career growth, which does not strictly rely on seniority. In contrast to China's neighbour Japan, workers do not need to reach certain age or number of years worked to climb up on the career ladder.⁶² One of the possible paths to a better position as well as higher remuneration is overtime work.⁶³ Staying late at work in order to finish a higher number of assigned tasks or to proactively do extra work is a conduct that is highly valued by Chinese managers. White-collar workers who leave the office among the last get respect not only from the leadership but also from the co-workers.⁶⁴ In 2006 the previously mentioned job site Zhaopin conducted a survey among their site users asking the reasons why employees choose to endure overtime and their responses became known as "three fears" (三怕 sān pà). The first fear is a fear of losing one's job, the second fear is being at a disadvantage in competition with colleagues, the third fear is a negative effect on their career.⁶⁵⁶⁶

As such, overtime ensures workers a more stable position within the team by having a deeper understanding of and involvement in the work problematics. This concurrently creates a desirable picture in the eyes of their superordinates. There are exceptions of superiors who think that a good worker can finish work within the assigned time and his or hers extensive working hours imply low work efficiency or lack of skills. This opinion however is shared by the minority of Chinese bosses and the

Workers' Life], *Zhaopin*, 2015: <http://article.zhaopin.com/pub/view/217834-26071.html> (accessed 10.09.2017).

⁶² Wei Huawei, *How to Upgrade...*, p. 93.

⁶³ Ou Shi, *Reflecting on the Overtime...*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Luo Lu and Chun-Yi Chou, *Long working hours...*, p. 142.

⁶⁵ Gao Lu, *Who Will Restrain...*, p. 25.

⁶⁶ Liang Ping and Li Yan, *Analysis on the Causes...*, p. 74.

general opinion about voluntary overtime meaning loyalty to the company and diligence is prevailing.⁶⁷ To workers who would like to achieve a successful career, overtime therefore represents a worthy undertaking as it is mostly understood as a willingness to take an active part in both the company's and worker's own career growth.

Specifics of the Chinese culture

Undoubtedly, there are concepts and impacts originating in the Chinese culture, which have a strong effect on attitudes towards work and facilitate the spread of overtime culture.

Firstly, the well-known face concept (面子 miànzi) that gives tone to all social interactions in China, not excluding those at a workplace. Workers are worried of losing face and being labeled as lazy or disloyal to their companies, which leads to casual acceptance of the overtime culture.⁶⁸ By leaving the workplace around the time when their shift should officially finish, white-collar workers would be at risk of losing their face in front of not only their superiors but also their colleagues.⁶⁹ Leaving the rest of the team in the lurch with unfinished work is a conduct that could cause severe harm to one's sense of face. As the research of Wang Duyu summarises, the motivations of workers to accept overtime culture as follows: "For the sake of own's face, fame, promotion and in order to pursue more wealth, Chinese workers are accepting extreme work conditions, which in some cases are leading to serious damage to their health."⁷⁰

The face concept is linked to yet another face related concept, namely face time. Some Chinese workers do not put in extra hours to deal with work that needs to be finished on that day but because of the importance of proving themselves hardworking to the superiors. As a result, overtime culture to many white-collar workers means incorporating overtime as a working habit.⁷¹ It's important to be seen at work, to show the face and spend face time in the company independent of whether there is work to do or not. Motivations to do so include showing diligence and a hardworking attitude to the superiors but also competition among

⁶⁷ Gao Jie, Reflection on the Problematics..., p. 96.

⁶⁸ Zhang Fengyi, Containing the 'Overtime Culture' ..., p. 7.

⁶⁹ Luo Lu and Chun-Yi Chou, Long working hours..., p. 142.

⁷⁰ Wang Duyu, Problematics of Voluntary Overtime..., p. 297.

⁷¹ Huang Shuomin, Why We Work Overtime..., p. 9.

colleagues within the department.⁷² Workers who stay longer could ensure better connections to the superordinates and therefore are at an advantage in comparison with the workers who leave the workplace before them.

Another important factor that makes workers stay long hours at work is the official rank standard (官本位 *guānběnwèi*).⁷³ The official rank standard implies that officials or superiors should always be respected and held in high esteem. Not abiding by their wishes would lead to a weak position in the team, low feedback resulting in lower income and disharmonic relations at workplace. And harmony as a concept deeply rooted in Confucianism extends its reach across the whole of social relations, including those at workplace.⁷⁴ On these grounds, refusal of overtime work could strongly violate both of the above explained concepts. Out of respect for the superiors it is undesired to leave the workplace before the boss does, which further fuels the incidence of overtime culture.⁷⁵ Even if assigned work is finished but the superiors are still busy, white-collar workers are staying at their work desks to either work longer or find a way how spend time until the boss is ready to leave.

Another important element of the Chinese culture that is making workers voluntarily accept long working hours is the ethic of hard work (勤勞美德 *qín láo měi dé*), which sets the tone for a diligent attitude towards achievements at work and emphasises that “one needs to suffer a little in order to be successful” (吃得苦中苦，方為人上人 *chī de kǔ zhōng kǔ, fāng wéi rén shàng rén*). “Working late till night is part of the fast pace of life in Shenzhen and it easily becomes one of the essential memories of young people who come to work there.”⁷⁶

One more cultural reason contributing to the prevalence of overtime culture is the fact that in China there is no tradition of a day of rest when people refrain from work activities and engage in leisure and restful activities. There is no equivalent to the Christians Sunday or the Jewish Saturday being a day of rest. The five-day working week has been implemented firstly in 1996 in pursuit of boosting domestic consumption and to help the Chinese economy by transferring money from the

⁷² Yu Weiyu, *Overtime as Seen from...*, p. 38.

⁷³ Wang Duyu, *Problematics of Voluntary Overtime...*, p. 297.

⁷⁴ Russell and Ross, *Work-Life in China...*, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Huang Shuomin, *Why We Work Overtime...*, p. 9.

⁷⁶ Wang Duyu, *Problematics of Voluntary Overtime...*, p. 297.

household savings into circulation.⁷⁷ White-collar workers work usually five days a week but regular overtime work on Saturdays or short notice overtime scheduled for the whole weekend are not exceptional. Some companies even do not hesitate to use the following motto: “We can ensure no rest on Saturday, Sunday’s rest we cannot ensure” (周六保证不休息, 周日休息不保证 zhōuliù bǎozhèng bù xiūxi, zhōurì xiūxi bù bǎozhèng).⁷⁸ Notwithstanding the implementation of the five-day working week, work on the weekends is an inseparable part of the 996 working system and in busy periods full working weekends are adopted by other companies as well.

Job market conditions

One of the “three fears” leading to the acceptance of overtime culture is the fear of losing one’s job. The Chinese job market offers splendid job opportunities but there is certainly not work for everyone. The official unemployment rates in China fluctuated between 3,9 and 4,3% in the period between 2002 and 2017.⁷⁹ Similarly, in August 2017, official statement of the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics reported unemployment rate of less than 5%⁸⁰ but for years there has been widespread doubts about the authenticity of this data. As the official numbers do not reflect any economic ups and downs and have remained incredibly stable for many years, various alternative studies started to emerge and offer different estimates. An alternative to the official data represents a working paper of the American National Bureau of Economic Research that claims that the real unemployment rate averaged 10,9% between 2002 and 2009. Researchers Feng Shuaizhang of the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics and Robert Moffitt and Hu Yingyao of Johns Hopkins University used data from an official urban household

⁷⁷ Elisabeth Croll, *China's new consumers : social development and domestic demand*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 67.

⁷⁸ Yi Ming, *The Joys and Sorrows...*, p. 43.

⁷⁹ Trading Economics, ‘China Underemployment Rate’, *Trading Economics*, 2017: <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/unemployment-rate> (accessed 17.09.2017).

⁸⁰ National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China ‘Guojia tongjiju xinwen fayanren jiu 2017 nian 8 yuefen guomin jingji yunxing qingkuang da jizhe wen’ [A Spokesman of the National Bureau of Statistics Speaking To Reporters in 2017 August about the Operations of the National Economy], *National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China*, 14.09.2017: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/sjjd/201709/t20170914_1534101.html (accessed 18.09.2017).

survey to construct an alternative index. Their research findings are twice as high as the never-changing official unemployment rate.⁸¹

Unfortunately, recent data about unemployment from a reliable source are not available but there is an undoubtable fear of white-collar workers for losing their jobs, which is documented by the research of independent entities such as the previously mentioned research of the job site Zhaopin identifying the three fears. Another factor that adds to job insecurity is the fact that the labour contracts could be terminated at any time.⁸² It is therefore a very legitimate fear that employees who do not obey company's overtime requirements could be immediately dismissed and become one of the indefinite number of jobseekers.

As a matter of fact, it is overtime culture itself that endangers the amount of positions available on the job market. Researchers Lai Desheng, Meng Dahu and Wang Qi from the School of Economics and Business Administration of the Beijing Normal University argue that there are national empirical studies showing that overwork in China has caused the reduction of many job opportunities, resulting in unemployment of people with enough abilities to work.⁸³ In light of all these facts, shrinking work opportunities and extensive working hours are putting white-collar workers in the Chinese megacities under enormous pressure and do not provide them much choice whether or not to accept the overtime culture.

Low work effectivity

China is known not only for its astonishing economic growth but also for a low labour effectivity, which is confirmed by several independent studies. Based on the analysis of Ernst & Young, China's labour productivity is still far behind the productivity performance of developed economies. After more than three decades of economic reforms, China's labour productivity is still behind countries such as Thailand, Colombia, and Morocco.⁸⁴ And as time spent at the workplace is concerned, based

⁸¹ Belsie Laurent, 'Official Statistics Understate Chinese Unemployment Rate', *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2015: <http://www.nber.org/digest/oct15/w21460.html> (accessed 17.09.2017).

⁸² Gao Jie, Reflection on the Problematics..., p. 96.

⁸³ Lai, Meng and Wang, Specifics of Labourers..., p. 37.

⁸⁴ Ernst & Young, 'China's productivity imperative', *Ernst & Young*, 2012: [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/China_productivity_imperative_en/\\$FILE/China-Productivity-Imperative_en.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/China_productivity_imperative_en/$FILE/China-Productivity-Imperative_en.pdf) (accessed 18.09.2017).

on the OECD data from 2011, the Chinese ranked fourth in the world in terms of the longest time spent at work, after Mexico, Japan and South Korea.⁸⁵ Reasons for low work effectivity are manifold. Too little time for rest, too much time spent in meetings and not much separation between personal and professional life belong to the most prominent ones.

Without a doubt, the large volume of work and very little or scarcely any time for rest, in the long run translates into low work effectivity. Adopting all kinds of overtime culture including the demanding 996 working system results in extreme pressure being put on many Chinese workers who are practically required to be highly efficient for extensively long working hours and do not get enough time to rest. Workers who adopt the overtime culture in the form of 996 working system can only rest one day a week, do not enjoy any annual holiday leaves and must be available on call also during the important holidays such as Chinese New Year, National holiday in October, often being referred to as Golden Week and other nationwide holidays.⁸⁶ These holidays are predominantly used by white-collar workers to visit their families in home provinces outside of the first-tier cities, to travel within China, or - as is becoming increasingly popular - to travel to international destinations. Overall, the overtime culture endangers workers' both everyday and annual time to rest, which results in low work effectivity.

An important aspect of the working environment in China is indeed the meetings that form part of the everyday work schedule. As such, these plentiful meetings and time spent in them has severe effect on work productivity and therefore prolongs the time spent at workplace. Based on the previously mentioned survey on the "Quality of the 8 hours of white-collar workers' lives" conducted in 2015 by the Chinese job site Zhaopin, 70% of respondents spend under one hour in meetings daily, however 18,1% of white-collar workers spend between 1 and 3 hours per day and 4,9% of workers spend 3 to 5 hours per day in meetings. And there is an incredible number of 5,2% of white-collar workers who in fact spend almost all working days in meetings.⁸⁷

This survey only accentuates the realisation of the problematics of long meetings and their effect on, firstly, lower productivity and, consequently, the spread of overtime work. The fact that 70% of workers

⁸⁵ Mishra and Smyth, *Work Hours in Chinese...*, p. 58.

⁸⁶ Shi Ji, *Can You Stand the...*, p. 42.

⁸⁷ Zhaopin, *8 Hours of White-collar...*, (accessed 10.09.2017).

are spending under one hour and the remaining 30% of white-collar workers are spending between 1 and an undefined number of hours, in some cases even reaching a full working day, time in meetings does certainly have a negative effect on the delivery of everyday tasks. As a result, white-collar workers do not have much choice but to put in some extra hours. Therefore, acceptance of overtime culture becomes an inevitable solution for finishing assigned work.

Another threat to work effectivity is the social media platform WeChat, which is widely used in both private and professional spheres of life. There are indisputable benefits of WeChat connecting employees of a company together and providing them a convenient platform to discuss work-related topics in either company WeChat groups or individually. Given this precondition of the new era of workplace connectivity through portable wireless technologies⁸⁸, white-collar workers are available to discuss work-related as well as personal issues at any time of the day. As well as benefits, this connectivity has problems. The discussion of work-related matters threatens the free time of workers who are expected to be constantly available on WeChat, including in the evenings, on weekends or even on vacations.⁸⁹ The discussion of personal matters during work time has a negative impact on work efficiency. As much as work-related issues penetrate into private life and lead to a work-life conflict⁹⁰, personal matters are entering the professional sphere of life. The fact that WeChat is used as a company communication channel makes the same platform very much available at all times in addition to being a personal instant messaging platform. Given the extensively long working hours of white-collar workers in the Chinese megacities, spending time on WeChat not only on work-related matters, is a common occurrence. Using the same social media platform of WeChat not only to communicate with colleagues and customers but also to chat with family and friends does have an affect on work effectivity. As a result, work tasks that could be done in an eight hours shift need to be handled in overtime hours.

⁸⁸ F. K. Schlosser, 'So, how do people really use their handheld devices? An interactive study of wireless technology use', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2002, Vol. 23, No. 4, p. 401.

⁸⁹ Liu Shengming, Zhang Ye, Chen Lifan, Guo Li and Yu Donglu, 'Enterprise WeChat Groups: Their Effect on Work-Life Conflict and Life-Work Enhancement', *Frontiers of Business Research in China*, 2015, Vol. 9, No. 4, p. 517.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 527.

Pressure in the first-tier and workplace as an ideal environment for social interactions

For young white-collar workers, the Chinese megacities offer not only exciting work opportunities but also challenges in terms of survival pressure and limited social interactions. The first-tier cities Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen are fast developing business centres that draw talent from all other Chinese provinces. Continuous media reports about successful stories of people who made their career in the megacities help to keep this trend alive.⁹¹ However, first-tier cities are not only known for good career development but in the same way also for survival pressure. The rising material standard of living and consumption in the big cities stimulates the increasingly higher material needs that workers choose to satisfy with overtime work in order to get higher remuneration.⁹² This desire of workers to work overtime in order to earn better incomes is in some cases linked to getting an overtime pay. However, more frequently overtime is used as a tool for faster promotion and therefore higher pay. According to the Chinese law, overtime work should be rewarded with 150% of the regular wage on work days, with 200% on weekends and with 300% of regular wage if worked during public holidays.⁹³ Nonetheless, this regulation is oftentimes not being obeyed.⁹⁴ Based on an online survey conducted by the job site China HRD in 2006, 80% of workers work overtime but only 45% of them are getting any kind of subsidy.⁹⁵ This subsidy could be pecuniary, sometimes it could be a work benefit in the form of “overtime dinner” (加班菜 jiābāncài) or a subsidy for transport expenses in times when overtime finishes so late that the public transport does not operate anymore.

On one hand, there is the desire for a higher wage that makes workers accept the overtime culture, on the other, there is the requirement to meet the living conditions of a big city. Workers who are not citizens of the city where they work are facing a strong exposure to the above mentioned survival pressure. Many workers live far from the city centre either on their own but mostly in shared flats or even rooms. Provided that opportunity to work longer and make the time in the big city more worthwhile by overtime work, many workers, especially young white-

⁹¹ Huang Shuomin, *Why We Work Overtime...*, p. 10.

⁹² Gao Jie, *Reflection on the Problematics...*, p. 96.

⁹³ Yi Shan, *Face to Face with...*, p. 39.

⁹⁴ Zeng, Lu and Sa'ad, *Working time in transition...*, p. 16.

⁹⁵ Lou Na, *Study on Overtime...*, p. 72.

collar workers, prefer to choose to put in some extra hours.⁹⁶ The overtime culture could therefore represent a welcomed fast track to a better career and hereby also to better life conditions.

Yet another factor leading to acceptance of the overtime culture, which is linked to the living conditions, is the fact that overtime culture provides young people a good social interaction platform. When working in a megacity that represents a foreign environment with very few if any social contacts, young people or early career professionals, especially those without family, welcome the opportunity to spend more time with their peers working on the development of their career. The workplace turns out to be an important place for social interactions where white-collar workers do not only work but also spend time on chats, dinners or even to play games with others. The progressive start-up companies are supporting this socializing trend at the workplace and therefore equip their offices with game consoles, sofa's and billiard tables. In doing so, companies create a favourable working environment where young people like to work and also play much longer than the usual eight hours.⁹⁷ The trend of the importance of providing a satisfactory office space appears to be confirmed also by the previously mentioned survey conducted by the job site Zhaopin. As many as 94,4% of workers born after 1990 expressed that when it comes to work decisions, work environment is either very important or important to them. The same applied to 64,1% of people born after 1980, 75,4% of white-collar workers born after 1970 and only to 53,3% of workers born after 1960.⁹⁸ The workers who take part in overtime culture are often being referred to as "overtimers" (加班族 *jiābānzú*) and only 30% of the young overtimers do feel a lack of happiness.⁹⁹ The overtime culture does therefore seem to play a certain role also as a factor in the well-being of fore mostly the young white-collar workers in the Chinese megacities.

Conclusion

The reasons and motivations of white-collar workers to work overtime are manifold. Most of them could be considered as mainly negative impacts on working time and therefore also work-life balance of

⁹⁶ Huang Shuomin, *Why We Work Overtime...*, p. 10.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁸ Zhaopin, *8 Hours of White-collar...*, (accessed 10.09.2017).

⁹⁹ Lin Pingshan, *Overtime: It Is Still...*, p. 14.

the white-collar workers. These reasons include career development, aspects of the Chinese culture, job market conditions and the survival pressure in the megacities. Fast or at least satisfactory career development requires a larger input of time. The need to show respect to superiors and the concept of preserving one's face also inevitably cause overtime. Fierce competition in the rapidly developing Chinese market does not give either companies or individuals much of a choice to slow down. The same applies to the the life conditions in the first-tier cities. Prices of the goods and services as well as of the housing are on a stable increase and to afford a decent living in either Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou or Shenzhen is indeed very expensive. Low work efficiency could be however considered as an unnecessary reason to work overtime and could be dealt with by appropriate time management strategies on the side of the superiors and also by the employees themselves.

Nevertheless, there seems to be also a positive aspect of overtime work. The overtime culture plays an important role in the life of white-collar workers, especially young white-collar workers, as it provides them a place for social interactions in the Chinese megacities. There is an undeniable desire amongst employers to create a favourable environment for young talents in order to translate their input into higher company profits. This seems to be mutually beneficial as young professionals do enjoy such working conditions. In the early stages of their career when they are eager to gain more work experience, take part in projects that matter and share their ideas and time with likeminded people. And that is precisely what some, fore mostly start-up, companies are offering them. A dynamic workplace that is not only an office space but also an entertainment and social interactions space, where workers can find both career development and fun. Under these conditions, the overtime culture gets easily and willingly accepted and appears to be a win-win situation for companies, as well as for the white-collar workers.

In light of the analysis of reasons and motivations of workers to accept the long working hours, the overtime culture does appear to be a double-edged sword. Whilst the overtime culture undoubtedly threatens any semblance of work-life balance, for many young white-collar workers it also represents a welcomed way of spending their time in lonely megacities and can therefore be regarded positively as well.

