



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree in
Language and Management to China

Final Thesis

Job burnout and “996 working hour system”:
how Chinese Generation Z reacts

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Matriculation Number 975517

Academic Year

2021/2022

ABSTRACT

My thesis analyses the impact of job burnout, focusing on the current Chinese situation. Investigating the cultural and economic factors that have contributed to the development of this condition among Chinese workers, my aim is to analyse the recent rebellion movements arose among young Chinese workers thanks to the social media, proposing a possible future development of the situation. The first chapter describes the birth of the concept of job burnout, its causes, the methods used to measure it, its effects on individuals and organisations and the global and Chinese extent of the phenomenon. The second chapter contains an analysis of the cultural values, the historical and economic roots of Chinese overwork culture, which also relates to some industrial policies and structural changes of Chinese economic structure. This section also analyses Chinese legislative protection of workers, which anyway has not avoided the development of the issue. The third chapter is a description of the "996" working hour system in high tech Chinese companies, and the debate around the topic. The fourth chapter illustrates the most relevant contemporary Chinese rebellion movements against "996" and overwork culture, developed by young workers whose mindset shows a different conception of work-life balance. Using social media, they are starting to express their resentment in a new way, trying to bring about a change.

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前言

我的论文的目的在于分析有关工作的心力交瘁对中国人有什么影响，特别是对中国Z世代工作于高科技行业的影响，重点是他们对目前工作环境如何正在表达他们的感觉。我选择关注这一类人因为采用社交媒体，他们生成了一些有意义的反叛运动。

如今，有关工作的心力交瘁是一个越来越流行的话题因为深深地影响着工人的生活质量。这个话题正在获得商界和机构越来越多的关注。在这个问题上，新冠疫情也有了很大的作用，因为封锁和智能工作让人们重新考虑工作和生活的平衡。

我选择这个话题的理由是因为照我看来，工作不仅是一个经济来源，也是对人们身份的塑造有很大的作用。由于这个原因，重要的是要经常评估工作对人的影响，认准工作对人们一直带来积极的内涵，比如说自信，自尊而不是带来身体或者心理的压力。不幸的是，工作倦怠正在成为一种全球普遍的现象。

在这种情况下，在过去的几年内，Z世代对目前的就业状况表现冤气。这新趋势在社交媒体的帮助下表达了自己的声音，在社会媒体上出现了一些关于这个话题的运动。工作于高科技行业的中国年轻人特别抱怨有关一个特定工作时间制度，叫996工作制。

本论文分为四章。在第一章中，我解释工作倦怠的概念是如何出生的，它的测量方法，它对人们产生的身体和心理后果，对整体心理健康的影响。我还说明工作场所的哪些方面导致这种状况，最后概述这种现象在全球和中国的传播情况。

第二章主要是寻找有关工作的心力交瘁的根源。这些根源可能与中国过去几十年的快速经济发展有关，也与中国文化中的一些文化价值观有关。中国最近实施的产业政策要求严格的工作节奏。这些，加上中国人强烈的职业道德和过劳

文化，正在影响着工人。本章的最后一节是关于中国对工人的法律保护的概述。正如我们将看到的那样，这往往被忽视在经济目标的名义上。

第三章说明工作倦怠与高科技行业 996工作制的联系，解释于该行业的许多中国公司里发生什么。尽管“996”工时制度的应用对工人不是一个有效的选择，很多中国高科技企业仍然对工人强加严格的节奏。996工作制的采用出现了不同的看法，从而引发了以场国际辩论。

第四章，最后一章，描述中国Z世代如何努力应对商业环境的过高要求：照他们看来，这些要求不相当于他们希望得到的报酬。中国Z时代对目前的工作环境与生活成本的增加感到愤慨。这一代人的思想很重要因为与过去相比是一个转折点：许多中国年轻人不再愿意接受任何工作条件，而是把精神健康放在首位。由于这些理由，在互联网上出生了一些反叛运动。从“996.ICU”、“Working time”开始到“躺平”运动，这些运动表示拒绝与理解的呼吁。我们将看到，躺平与类似的全球传播趋势有联系。最后一章还讨论中国如何看待这种变化，以及新冠疫情的流行如何促进了这种心态的变化。最后，我将对目前的情况进行一些思考因为目前的情况正在要求未来的调整。

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my thesis is to analyse the impact that job burnout is having on Chinese people, especially on Chinese Generation Z employed in the high tech industry, focusing on the way they found to express their resentment about the current job environment. I chose to focus on this category of people because it is where some significative rebellion movements were born thanks to social media.

Nowadays, job burnout is a topic that is becoming more and more popular because it deeply influences the quality of workers' lives and it is gaining more and more attention from the world of work and institutions. A big role in this matter is also played by the Covid-19 pandemic, because lockdown and smart working generated a reconsideration of the work-life balance.

I chose this topic because work in my opinion is not a mere financial source, but also an aspect in which our identity is shaped. For this reason, it is important to always assess the impact that work has on people and to ensure that it contributes to people's lives with positive connotations such as self-confidence and fulfilment, without generating physical and psychological stress. Unfortunately, it is quite clear that job-related burnout is becoming a globally common phenomenon.

In this context, during the last years Generation Z is showing resentment about the current employment situation. This new trend is expressing its voice with the help of social media, where some movements arose about the topic. Chinese young people employed in the high tech industry are especially complaining about the endorsement of a particular working hour system: "996".

In the first chapter, I explain how the concept of job burnout was born, its measurement methods, the physical and psychological consequences that it generates on people, influencing the overall mental health. I also illustrate which are the aspect of workplaces that contribute to this condition, concluding with an overview about the diffusion of the phenomenon both globally and in China.

The second chapter is focused on finding the roots of job burnout, which can be related both to the Chinese fast economic development that characterises the last

decades and also to some cultural values typical of Chinese culture. The recent industrial policies implemented by China require strict working rhythms. These, together with the Chinese strong work ethic and overwork culture are affecting workers. The final section of this chapter contains a legislative overview about the Chinese legal protection of workers, which as we will see is often neglected in the name of economic goals.

The third chapter illustrates the connection between job burnout and the application of the “996” working hour system in high tech industry, explaining what happens in many Chinese companies of the sector even if it has been proved imposing strict rhythms to workers is not a productive choice. The endorsement of “996” working hour system has generated conflicting opinions, which gave origin to an international debate.

The fourth and last chapter depicts how Chinese Generation Z is trying to react against what business environment requires from them without giving them the proper rewards. Indignant about the current job environment and the increased cost of living, this generation marks a turning point compared to the previous ones: many of them are no more willing to whatever condition but they are instead prioritising mental wellbeing.

This is how some rebellion movement were born on the Internet, starting from “996.ICU”, “Working time” to arrive to “Tang Ping” movement, a clear expression of refusal and a call for understanding. As we will see, Tang Ping is rooted in other similar movements and also how it is related to other similar globally spread trends. This last chapter proceeds with how China is perceiving this changing situation, with how Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to this mindset change, to end with some consideration about the current situation which is calling for future adjustments.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PHENOMENON OF JOB BURNOUT

1.1. FIRST CONCEPTUALISATION OF BURNOUT

The birth of burnout as a concept is attributed to the American psychiatrist Herbert J. Freudenberger and his experience at a health care institute in New York. He was working there as a voluntary in the first years of 1970's. Discussing with his colleagues he realised that he and some of them were all experiencing a condition of physical and psychological suffering related to work. In Freudenberger's article "Staff Burn-Out" published in the Journal of Social Issues of 1974, he compares the feelings he felt to the definition of the term "burn-out", which is "to fail, wear out or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources". In the article the psychiatrist describes some physical and behavioural signs that he and his colleagues experienced during that period, taking the first steps toward the formal recognition of the phenomenon. Despite the changes in the nature of work occurred in the last fifty years, the suffering traits described by Freudenberger are still contemporary. He reported, to cite some, exhaustion and fatigue, gastrointestinal and sleep disorders, irritation, frustration and depression (Freudenberger, 1974).

Born with reference to health care professions, after the psychiatrist H.J. Freudenberger broke the ice, the concept started to spread and to gain attention, proving that the phenomenon was actually existing and that people just needed a word to use when referring to it. Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) indeed claimed that "burnout first emerged as a social problem and not as a scholar construct".

1.2 MEASUREMENT OF BURNOUT AND ITS DIMENSIONS

Burnout is a condition that involves both the physical and the psychological spheres. For this reason its measurement can be tricky because of the difficulties encountered when dealing with a wide range of factors, which are also subjective.

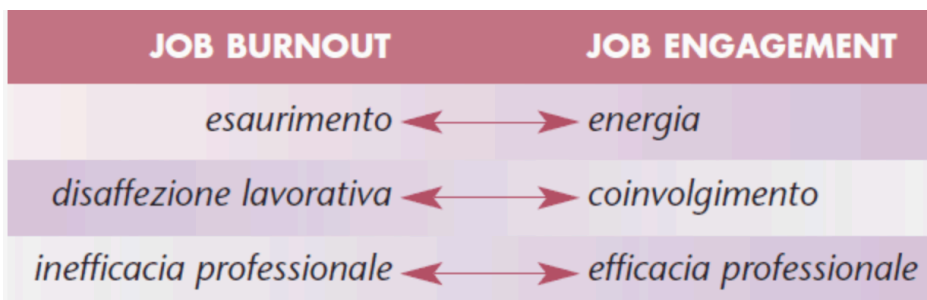
However, in 1981 Christina Maslach, social psychologist and psychology professor at the Berkley University, together with her colleague Susan E. Jackson, elaborated the well-established Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Burnout has been studied in many ways and a lot of scale and measurements exist, but the MBI is the most authoritative one. It is recognised and approved by the World Health Organisation and it is still used today to assess burnout. Supported by the Biomedical Sciences Support Grant, this scale was created studying the occurrence of burnout phenomenon in human range professions among the United States. These include: nurses, police, social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, attorneys, counsellors, physicians, agency administrators, teachers, which are all characterised by the presence of high emotional involvement and strong feeling (synergist.aiha.org). Many adjustments of this method have been done to improve its reliability and effectiveness.

Burnout measurement with MBI consist of a 22-item questionnaire that covers feelings and attitude toward the person itself, the job, and the relationship between the individual and his job. Each statement is rated by intensity and frequency (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). The two creators of the scale substantially displayed burnout as made of three dimensions. The first one is “Emotional exhaustion”, that is “the feeling of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work”. Exhaustion usually derives from a lack of balance between what is demanded by the job and the resources that a person has to offer. The second dimension is called “Depersonalisation”, which consists of “an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's care or service”. The term refers to a detachment from the external world that generates cynicism. Maximum responses in this first two dimensions suggest the presence of burnout. The third dimension is “Personal accomplishment”, which measures to which extent a person finds itself satisfied with his job-related capabilities and measures the “feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people” (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). When job burnout is present, the person is likely to have a low consideration of himself/herself, together with a decrease of desire for success. The rating of this dimension goes in the opposite way: the lower is the score, the highest is the “degree of experienced burnout”. Practical results of this measurement tool show

that people who experience burnout suffer from a wide range of negative feelings about their job situation that go from being dissatisfied to the perception that what they are doing in their jobs has no meaning. It is in fact important to remember that burnout is not just the mere job dissatisfaction (Maslach and Jackson, 1981).

The dimensions touched by the Maslach Burnout Inventory are related to the personal perception of the working experience but are detached from the organisation in which a person is working. For this reason in 2000, Christina Maslach and M.P. Leiter designed a second more comprehensive approach: the Organisational Checkup System (OCS), (Leiter and Maslach, 2000). This model is not made in substitution of MBI, but instead it can be used to have an overview on the relationship between the individual and the organisational context. We can in fact assume that when investigating burnout causes, it is important to be aware of the particular conditions in which the phenomenon arises. Therefore, OCS suggests an organisational approach that takes into account not only the way in which a person carries out his job, but also the structure, the functioning of the work environment and the interactions among individuals within an organisation. This model proposes the continuum job engagement-job burnout as the representation of the individual's relationship with one's job. Being a multidimensional syndrome, the authors assign three characteristics to each of the two continuum extremities: job engagement is characterised by energy, engagement and professional effectiveness. On the contrary job burnout is characterised by exhaustion, job disengagement and professional ineffectiveness.

The next step carried out by Maslach and Leiter (2005) was the identification of the factors that drive a person from the three characteristics of job engagement to the three of job burnout.



Job burnout and job engagement's characteristics.
(Source: giuntipsy.it)

As showed by the picture, the factor that from energy drives a person to exhaustion is individual resistance. The path that starts with engagement and brings to job disaffection depends on the reaction to colleagues and job itself, whereas what drives an employee from a feeling of personal efficiency to a feeling of professional ineffectiveness is identified in the individual reaction toward one's job. To simplify, according to this model job burnout depends on the perception that a person has of job environment's characteristics and their balance among them. Currently, the practical application of this detailed model is carried out by handing out anonymous questionnaires that covers all the dimensions described above. The Organisational Checkup System was in fact created with a practical purpose. It is useful not only for investigating how job burnout develops and which are the variables involved in the process, but also for providing organisations with an instrument useful to monitor the extent of the phenomenon, so that they can act to improve working conditions. OCS is in fact considered as a measurement of workers wellbeing within companies. As we will analyse later on, identifying burnout in companies, treating it and preventing it is of fundamental importance.

1.3 FORMAL RECOGNITION OF JOB-RELATED BURNOUT AND ITS SYMPTOMS

The path toward the discovering of burnout started with empirical observation of some physical and psychological manifestations among health care workers. From the intuition of the psychiatrist Freudenberger, burnout has been found and studied in a lot of different fields, showing that any kind of job and occupation can be source of discomfort. In 2019 the World Health Organisation finally recognised it as a syndrome. The 11th International Classification of Disease (ICD-11) published by WHO, modifies the burnout definition reported in ICD-10, broadening the meaning of the term “job burnout” and giving it a more specific description: from “state of vital exhaustion” (ICD-10, WHO, 2010) the latest version of the international classification

of diseases claims that “Job burnout is a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”, concluding that “Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life” (ICD-11, WHO, 2019). It is in fact defined as an “occupational phenomenon” and not as a “medical condition” (WHO, 2019).

Interestingly the three characteristics of burnout reported in the international document are the same identified by Christina Maslach and S.E Jackson (1981). ICD-11 became effective in January 2022. The three characteristics of burnout generate effects both in the physical and the psychological area. Burnout in fact besides “having a negative impact on quality of life and mental health, it is also implicated in several disease states” (Melamed et al., 2006).

Considering the difficulty of assessing burnout, it is important to remember that the causes of discomfort coming from outside the work sphere interact with the work sphere itself, resulting in a mixture of factors that influence each other. Moreover, since burnout can affect different aspects of human health, there can be a variety of ways through which it manifests itself. In addition, depending also on environmental factors, each person can experience different manifestations of burnout, depending on the kind of situation they are involved in. For these reasons, burnout manifestation can cover a wide range of symptoms.

Kahill back in 1988 elaborated a categorisation of burnout symptoms, which can be still considered valid. They are classified as: physical, emotional, behavioural, interpersonal and attitudinal symptoms (Kahill, 1988). Physical symptoms include fatigue, physical exhaustion, headaches, gastro-intestinal disturbances, colds and flu, musculoskeletal diseases such as chronic back, neck pain and osteoarthritis (Honkonen et al., 2006). Burnout is also connected to insomnia as the two influence each other because of their common association with stress, causing also anxiety (Melamed et al., 2006). Scientific literature also confirms a cause-effect relationship between burnout and cardiovascular diseases such as stroke, ischemic and coronary heart diseases and sudden heart attack. In some cases, the risk of cardiovascular diseases connected to burnout is even higher than the risk for classical biological factors like age, body mass

index, smoking, blood pressure, lipid levels. Experts assume also a relationship with burnout and the etiology of Type 2 diabetes and men infertility (Melamed S. et al, 2006).

With regard to emotional symptoms, the European Commission included in its report (2014) anxiety, stress, mental breakdown, mental illness. Burnout and depression have often been associated with each other, generating confusion about the relationship between the two phenomena. Undoubtedly who is experiencing burnout experiences also feelings attributable to depression. Anyway, burnout cannot be identified as depression. The discriminant of this differentiation is the context in which they occur: depression can relate to any life sphere and it is not context-specific. On the contrary, burnout is work-related (Maslach C. et al., 2001). This distinction supports the definition of burnout as an “occupational distress syndrome” (Leiter and Durup, 1994). However, the relationship between burnout and depression is twofold. On one side, we can assume that burnout is a sort of specific kind of depression related to work. On the other side, who is affected by burnout experiences depression feelings. Aloha K. E (2014) claimed that “If burnout and depression are not the same thing”, it is clear that (...) “people with burnout symptoms meet diagnostic criteria for depression”.

As illustrated by Kahill (1988), the psychological suffering caused by burnout can also generate symptoms reflected on behaviour. These are mainly work-related and consumption-related: discomfort in work environment can cause negative behaviours within organisations such as high turnover, poor performance, absenteeism, tiredness, misuse of work breaks, theft at work. All of them imply costs for organisations. Who is affected by burnout has also high probabilities to experience bad consumption behaviours such as abuse of alcohol, drugs or caffeine.

Relationships are also negatively affected by burnout: interpersonal symptoms could involve clients, friends and family members. Private life can be damaged by work interference among private and family life. Interpersonal behaviours can manifest themselves in form of defensive escape or avoidance or verbal and physical violence. They can result also in family disagreements, introversion, negligence or a decrease of care toward friendships.

Last but not least, job-related burnout can also generate attitudinal symptoms such as cynicism, pessimism, defensiveness, intolerance. When affected by job burnout, resistance to go to work and the desire to isolate from people increase. In general, there is a reduction of satisfaction with work, but also with life as a whole (Kahill, 1988). The aforementioned symptoms and manifestations of this occupational syndrome can lead in extreme cases to death if not controlled and managed in time. Death can be caused both by physical conditions arose because of burnout but also by mental suffering, strain and depression that can lead to suicide (Kahill, 1988).

1.4 TRIGGERING FACTORS OF BURNOUT

When searching for burnout causes, first of all there is the need of being aware of some changes occurred with regard to contemporary society and its general work situation. These changes have been influencing the way people act and react in job contexts. The impact of job on people changed too, as well as our attitudes toward it. It is in fact important to remember that the rising of a new phenomenon is usually triggered by some alterations in the status quo that unsettle a certain balance.

With regard to society in general terms, Lasch (1979) identified an increase of individualisation which is characterising contemporary society: people are becoming more and more narcissistic and self-absorbed. These attitudes entail the wish to reach immediate gratification, that eventually is never achieved, thus bringing never-ending dissatisfaction.

Analysing the changes occurred in the way people work, scholars claimed that the shift from manual to mental work brought by the introduction of high technology in almost every job field, led to an increased pressure on people. People always need to learn new processes, to be careful and attentive not to commit mistakes. Therefore, mental and emotional workload has increased (Cherniss, 1980a). Moreover, growing market competition increases the sense of responsibility of employees, both toward the people they deal or collaborate with and toward themselves. Emotional workload is heavier because every little mistake or negligence could negatively influence other people's perception of the individual. Another concept that generates pressure is the so

called "Professional mystique" (Cherniss, 1980a): professions have been heroised, also by training programs. "Education instills high expectations": students expect their work to be exiting and meaningful (Leiter,1991): who enters a new job position is filled with high expectations and pride for being chosen to cover that position. Gradually, people often figure out that it was an illusion. Routine takes place, and delusion too (Cherniss, 1980a).

The "psychological contract" (Scahufeli and Enzmann, 1998) evolved too: a job contract consists of an agreement on an exchange of work for money. Besides the practical meaning, the psychological part comes into play. What is also virtually signed, is a reciprocal promise of mutual and balanced exchange. Nowadays, this balance has been changing in favour of the employer. Employees are required to carry out more complex jobs while experiencing insecurity and instability because of the less guarantees offered by the employer in terms of contract types, reward and benefits. This is the changed background that is being a fertile land for the development of job burnout.

Being a phenomenon that arises in job-related contexts, specific factors contributing to burnout have been found right inside organisations. Leiter (1991) developed a model that conceptualises the "conflict between personal aspirations and organisational limitations". The key concept of the model is the balance among demands and supplies of the environment. The author makes use of the three dimensions elaborated by Maslach (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, personal accomplishment) around which factors are developed. He identified the three following categories of factors as sources of stress within organisations.

- Organisational stressors: inside organisations workload and the consequent tedium caused by routine and collegiality are stressors that can have an impact on commitment and depersonalisation, resulting into emotional exhaustion. What is often reported is an absence of meaningfulness, both with regard to routine work and interactions with colleagues. If workers have at their disposal supportive resources, the impact of emotional exhaustion could be softened. For example, who has strong social networks or opportunities to enhance and show his effectiveness is less likely to experience burnout.

- Conflicts with professional values: the degree of competence and autonomy inside an organisation can influence the development of emotional exhaustion and the subsequent depersonalisation and diminished perception of personal achievement. Professional values indeed have a result in all the three dimensions of burnout. The extent to which a person's skills are actually used in work and the extent to which the job requires other kind of not owned skills can cause a feeling of scarce competence. Jones and Nisbett (1971) wrote about the “Mea culpa reaction” that can be considered a sort of extreme self-blaming presumably derived from weak self-esteem, which makes a person feel that he/she is not suitable for the job. When experiencing burnout, it is often possible to fail to distinguish what is actually caused by the individual and what is instead ascribable to organisational factors. In this cases, there is an overestimation of the importance of personal variables which has been called “Fundamental attribution error” (Ross, 1977).

With regard to autonomy, the concept of “coping” is central: people who face problems at work without trying to avoid them are less likely to reach burnout. Instead, who escapes from them might have the opposite outcome. “Control copers” are advantaged also because they might build better relationship with supervisors and coworkers and have more chances to increase competence, because this kind of behaviour increases self-efficacy (Leiter 1991). On the opposite side, “Coping escapers” are less likely to produce these positive effects and it is also very probable that they will keep acting in this way, generating a vicious cycle. Undoubtedly, the degree of autonomy that can be performed depends on the kind of business structure.

- Problems in collegiality: conflicts among colleagues contribute to emotional exhaustion. Positive relationship and reciprocal support soften the impact of the three dimensions of burnout. Here, the role of support from coworkers and the organisation itself is central. A central task for the company should be that of encouraging collegiality.

To sum up, it is assumable that the relationship with the job itself, with people in the organisation and most importantly with a personal values are all very influent in this issue. In my personal opinion, all of the aforementioned situations merge into a single concept: the gap perceived between what we expect and what the reality is. It is very

common that people, especially young people, enter the job market with a lot of enthusiasm but after a while they feel disillusioned and disappointed. This happens because the pressure that society and family put on them is so interiorised and normalised that becomes part of the person and it is translated into excitement. But when analysing this excitement it is actually difficult to determine what this is all about. It is a kind of nebulous feeling of excitement that it can be hardly materialised into something you are really looking for. This process results into delusion and disappointment. Everything can be reduced to a simple concept: reality does not meet the standards of dreams and work is not all about excitement. According to Maslach (1982), Golembiewsky and Muzenrider (1990) pressure that people put over themselves in every aspect of life and the full commitment expected increases the vulnerability to burnout. Contemporary society dynamics, such as the pace of our lives and the “demanding approach to work” might have some responsibility in what is happening.

Having considered the general changes and the current social situation, scholars agree that besides organisational factors, some person-specific risk factors exist, such as demographic variables and specific personality traits. The presence of work-specific possible factors is therefore mediated by personal factors, both in a positive and negative way. Gann (1979) explained the reason why at the same working conditions, burnout is not experienced by everyone. Demographic and personality-related elements play a big role in this process: younger people are more likely to suffer because of their vulnerability and the limited experience gathered. Married people usually have the support of family that mitigates the impact of occupational issues. Personality traits also increase or decrease the chances for burnout to come up: people who are by nature anxious, reserved, fearful, introspective are less able to cope with stress, less optimistic and less confident, thus giving more ground to the possible development of burnout (Heckman, 1980).

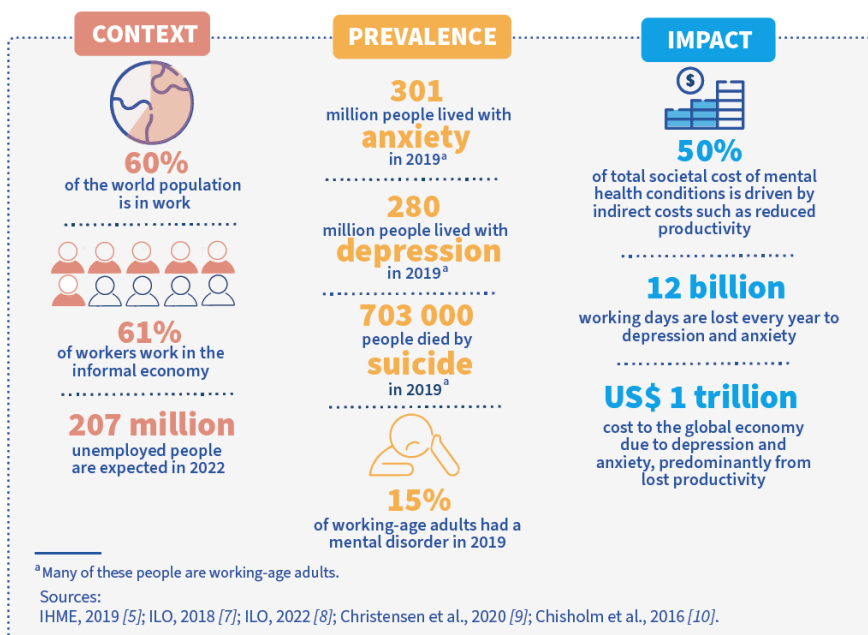
1.5 GLOBAL EXTENT OF JOB BURNOUT

Work is an important part of everyone’s life. Not only it provides economic resources that allow people to live, but it is also an important element around which

people's identity is shaped (Leiter and Schaufeli, 1996). For this reason, studying the impact that work has on individuals is of primary importance. Studies focused on job burnout were born in the occupational field of human service professional probably because of the emotional burden experienced by them when dealing with sick and unstable patients. However, as researches progressed, job burnout has been found in many different fields and industries, as a proof that everyone is vulnerable to this condition (Leiter and Schaufeli, 1996). Undoubtedly, events and dynamics experienced in different jobs can lead to different ways in which job burnout starts, develop and is perceived. Each job position is characterised by its own issues, preoccupations, risks. However, despite the nuances that the phenomenon can assume, it can affect anybody, no matter which is the kind of occupation or the role within an organisation. For instance, the way white and blue-collar experience job burnout is similar, as showed by Toppin et al. (2002).

As job burnout is spread worldwide and affects every kind of job, comprehensive studies have been carried out trying to understand and evaluate the global extent of the phenomenon. In a positive workplace individuals can benefit from work in a personal way: challenging yourself daily and observing the results of your work is a positive boost to motivation and self-confidence. However, workplaces are not always positive and stimulating environments, yet sometimes a negative place which contributes to the rising of mental health issues.

▸ Mental health at work in numbers



As showed by the chart, even before Covid-19 pandemic job-related mental health issues such as depression and anxiety were already

affecting a significant amount of people. In 2019 more than 703,000 suicides were registered, 301 million people lived with anxiety and 280 million people were depressed. These numbers show the existence of a concrete problem that cannot be neglected by organisations, institutions and governments. According to the recent report of Eurofound (2022), psychosocial risks at work affect a significant portion of workers. Among the large spectrum of organisational, situational, personal factors and other variables that can contribute to the development of job burnout, some recurrent patterns have been identified.

Eurofound (2022) claimed that, besides overwork, the most reported factor is work intensity (experienced by about a half of workers), followed by low autonomy (1/4 of workers) and emotional demand (1/5 of workers). Moreover, 1 worker out of 5 claims not to receive recognition for his job. With regard to wage and job security, 30% of the workers interviewed claim that they are not fairly paid and a big amount of workers perceive insecurity both in earnings and employment. Situation for women has been demonstrated to be even more negative in all of the aspects mentioned above. Working time arrangements also play a big role in causing stress and mental health issues, especially with regard to working in unsocial hours (at night) and to the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. This includes working in free time (16%), being called to work at short notice (14%) and worrying about work when at home (30%). With regard to the more general balance between job demands and job resources, about 1/3 of workers experienced job strain due to this unbalance, especially women and workers with temporary job contracts.

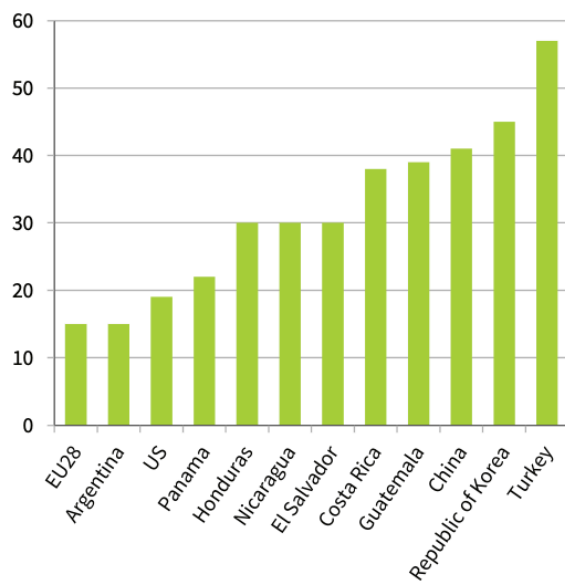
According to a joint analysis of WHO and ILO (2021), the 8.9% of global population, which amounts to almost 500 million of people, worked in the years from 2000 and 2016 more than 55 hours per week. Diseases ascribable to the overcoming of 55 hours of work per week, especially ischemic diseases and strokes, caused 754,000 deaths only in 2016. This number constitutes a 29% increase of deaths from 2000. The largest number of deaths regionally was estimated for South-East Asia. More recently, the 19% of workers typically worked 48 hours or more per week (24% of men and 13% of women) (Eurofound 2022). The level of discontent and discomfort with job is noteworthy also in Italy. According to the presentation made by Mindwork in

collaboration with WHO in occasion of the World Mental Day (October 10th), the striking percentage of 80% of Italian workers has experienced at least 1 symptom correlated to burnout in 2022 (Mindwork, 2021). The most affected by job burnout in Italy are managers, followed by health professionals and those employed in financial and insurance industries. The most reported reasons leading to burnout for Italians are overwork, work overload, pressing timetable, having to deal with highly demanding people and the fear of losing job (Istat, Eurostat 2021). It is assumable that this condition is particularly relevant for younger workers, as 1 out of 2 under 34 left his job because of emotional discomfort last year.

1.6 CHINESE EXTENT OF JOB BURNOUT

China is among the countries that are often seen with suspect with regard to working conditions, especially as far as work safety is concerned. More precisely, what usually comes to mind are the poor conditions of manufacturing workers. It is indeed widely known that a big amount of Chinese blue-collars are cheap labourers often employed in the informal economy. Informal economy does not protect them from

Figure 14: Incidence of working over 48 hours, by country or region (%)

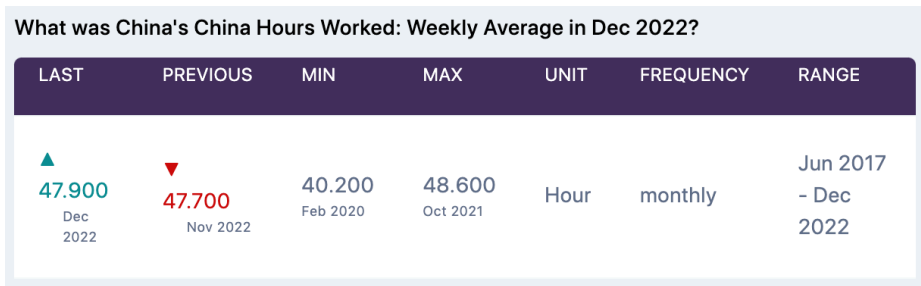


Source: Eurofound and ILO, 2019

exploitation and unpaid overwork, neither from poor safety conditions such as exposure to harmful chemicals. International organisations are aware of this problem and they are working by issuing and modifying global labour standards.

Unfortunately, it is important to remember that not only manufacturing workers are affected by bad working conditions: also white-collars workers are subjected to physical

and mental strain due to work. Job burnout has been investigated by scientific literature in each and every industry, from police to teachers, from doctors to hotel employees and surely also in students (Eurofound and ILO, 2019). Compared with Europe, China and other Eastern countries report higher percentage of overwork. Specifically, 40% of Chinese workers experience overwork. Considering the demographic size of the country, this is a very considerable and worrying figure. China is one of the country with the longest working hours in the world (Liu et al. 2021).



China hours worked: weekly average 2017-2022 (Source: National Bureau of Statistics, CEIC)

The National Bureau of Statistics in 2022 reported for China weekly average of almost 48 working hours. However, it is difficult to evaluate with precision this kind of data for China because of the large amount of overtime work left undeclared especially in the informal economy (stats.gov.cn). In addition to having one of the longest working hours in the world, according to the China Youth Daily, an average of 600,000 people dies ever year because of overwork (China Youth Daily, 2016). Regardless the impressive numbers, researches on these topics are limited in China.

Despite the scarce attention on the issue coming from within China, since 2019 a great amount of global attention has been focused on high tech and digital companies, giving life to a large-scale discussion with international impact. This industry has been victim of overwork, excessive and unregulated overtime and violation of labor law. The reason why this sector is considerably affected by these negative dynamics is because the survival of its companies rely on continuous innovation, that causes extremely stressful work rhythms (Liu et al. 2021). The impactful changes occurring nowadays in the field of technology are happening along with an intense international competition and huge pressure on this industry's workers. The core of the discussion

touches the delicate topic of the improper usage of working timetables. Internet and technology companies need to speed researches and production processes to be always at the edge. This is reflected to the engines of innovation: employees and workers.

For censorship-related reasons, there is not a wide source of reliable data and researches on the actual extent of long working hours in this sector. Despite this, it is known that long working hours are a commonplace in Chinese Internet companies and that working to death has a history also in this industry (Liu et al. 2021). Despite the organisational differences between Western and Chinese companies, when investigating the mechanisms that link work to burnout among white collars, we can notice that Western patterns are the same as the ones occurring in China. Among these there are job demand-job resources unbalance, effort-reward unbalance, effort-recovery unbalance, low control and so on (Liu et al. 2021). In my personal opinion, among all the factors, overwork can be considered the most influent one on mental and physical health because it encompasses all the other work-related stressors and balances, making them more impactful. Working overtime is strongly connected to depression symptoms also in China (Liu et al. 2021). As a matter of facts, overtime workers suffer from higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to people working the right amount of hours. Therefore, working overtime is a predictor of depression and adverse mental health (Kleppa et al. 2008).

In this industry even working to death is well-known: suicidal tendencies and death caused by work-related healthy issues are not strangers (Tyssen et al, 2000). Increasing the time spent at work, the exposure to work-related stressors increases. These hours are also subtracted from the potential amount of spare time, which is useful to recover and to reduce the accumulated stress. Moreover, the first survey carried out on sleep quality of Chinese internet company employees in 2016, showed that around the 70% of them experienced insomnia, showing also that the 60% of them worked overtime (Iresearch 2016). Sleep deprivation and lack of recovery from work-related stress cause fatigue that leads to depression. This has to be added to the negative emotions caused by the lack of time for socialisation and personal life (Liu et al. 2021).

1.7 HOW CHINA DEALS WITH MENTAL HEALTH-RELATED ISSUES

The reason why a precise portrait of job burnout-related diseases and deaths in China is very difficult to obtain and the reasons behind the acceptance of improper working conditions by workers might be also related to the fact that in China awareness about the importance of mental health has still not reached Western levels. Sensitivity about the topic is not well developed in the country, also because the perception of mental health in China has not undergone an easy history. Mental distress and illness have been considered for a long time to be something to hide and fight.

During Cultural Revolution, (1966-1976), mental disorders such as depression were attributed to a wrong political thinking and therefore persecuted instead of treated. The response to mental disorders was that of imposing the study of Maoist works, with the aim of refocusing people's attention to what were considered to be the right models. Arthur Kleinman (2011) explains that during that period, attributing a mental disease to people was a way to legitimise political attack. Since then changes have been occurred, but it is still impressive to observe that even in the last years of the twentieth century, Chinese understanding of the importance of mental health was so distant from our standard. The application of the Eugenics Law in 1995 is representative of this gap. Renamed as Maternal and Infant Health law to cover the dreadful meaning of the regulation imposed, the law has had the purpose of avoiding "inferior births". The practical application of the law consisted of medical tests for couples done to investigate the presence of potential hereditary illness, ranging from venereal, reproductive and mental. If medical checkups resulted positive, the couple was required to be sterilised or forced to practice abortion (Dikotter, 1998).

Nowadays, despite some improvements, the situation concerning mental health is still underdeveloped. This is the case of the situation undergoing in the province of 新疆 Xīnjiāng, populated by Uyghurs. Being a Muslim population, Uyghurs are officially thought to be an extremist minority with wrong religious thinking. For this reason, they are treated as they are all suffering from a mental illness that requires action (Sigal, 2018). Leaning on this belief, China Central government acted by sending State workers to Uyghurs' houses with the aim of monitoring their degree of potential

danger and reeducating them by teaching Chinese official language and the devotion cult of Xi Jinping. This is happening to the 11 million of them. If it is decided that some of them represent a threat, they are sent to the “re-education camps”, where they are subjected to extremely poor conditions, forced to act against their beliefs eating pork and drinking alcohol (Pieranni, 2020).

The phenomenon of Uyghurs is strongly representative of the fact that mental health in China is still considered to be related to political matters. This suggests a huge deficiency in the understanding and knowledge of mental health and mental illness. In this field China shows insensitivity as it finds its way to protect its political stability instead of recognising the real nature of the problem and protecting people’s health. Once again, the position of China is unclear and inconsistent: while condemning Uyghurs to extreme behaviours, China is at the same time showing willingness and commitment to improve consciousness of mental health care.

In 2002, China issued its first National Mental Health Plan with the aim of establishing an effective mental health care system and contributing to the development of a consciousness related to the issue (Liu et al., 2021). In 2012, China implemented the Mental Health Law and few years later the National Mental Health Working Plan (2015-2020), followed by the 2019-2030 Healthy China Action Plan, which aims to improve the treatment rate of depression of the 80% by 2030 and to improve the public understanding of the topic.

In the last twenty years China joined many plans for the enhancement of mental health system. However, many incongruences transpire in the way this sector has been managed. Public opinion shows scepticism about the actualisation of the above mentioned plans, firstly because of the lack of capital availability. According to WHO (2004), the budget dedicated to mental health by Chinese government is very low. What further complicates the feasibility of these plans is the scarce knowledge of this medicine area across the country (Smith, 2020), together with a paucity of specialised professional workers in the field, which is below the global average (WHO, 2004). Moreover, access to mental health care is still unbalanced: rural inhabitants are disadvantaged compared to urban ones. This is actually considered to be one of the most serious problem related to the topic (Liu et al., 2021). In this general overview, it is

assessable the progress is still needed in China as far as building a well structured and complete mental health care system is concerned. In my opinion, China has always been a country strongly focused on economic performance, sometimes at the expense of people. This attitude generates a lack of focus on the safeguard of people wellbeing, in this case of mental health. The hope is that the pressure coming from cooperation agreements stipulated with the Western world will stimulate the country to adjust its system.

CHAPTER TWO

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERWORK AND ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL ROOTS IN CHINA

To fully understand job burnout, its impact on workers and how they are reacting, the first step is to analyse the massive economic transformations occurred in China in the last five decades. These changes created a new economic environment characterised by successful achievements. Certainly, new standards need a constant economic performance, which is possible only with the support of labor force. This overview over the important structural changes occurred in China helps us to better understand the path that led to the current economic situation, the role that workers have in this growth context and the pressure that Chinese long term goals are putting on workers.

2.1 OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN CHINESE ECONOMY

Contemporary Chinese economy is the result of extensive changes and deep evolutions occurred especially in the last 45 years that have permeated the country structure and fabric. The remarkable extent of these transformations is proved by the impressive economic results reached by China in such a restricted time lapse. From being a rural country, China has rushed into the following economic stages, becoming in just four decades one of the most powerful global economies.

Central in this huge transition have been and still are the role of Chinese government in planning and controlling the national economy and the role of people, workers. Conversely, industrial development and economic structural changes have consequently led to a reorganisation of society, involving both people and institutions. The first big step in this process has been done by Dèng Xiǎopíng 邓小平, who laid the foundations of massive industrial development with the Reforms and the Opening Up 改革开放 Gǎigé kāifàng in 1978. The general economic plan was then progressively updated and adjusted during decades, widening its extents. With the increase of the available resources and investments, goals evolved too. From the aim of catching up with the global industrialisation level, the mindset switched to the goal of overcoming

the world most powerful countries (Spigarelli, 2018).

As the final goal is still not achieved, the process is still ongoing: the Chinese president, Xi Jinping 习近平 launched other industrial policies to enhance the innovation race. 中国制造 2025, “Made in China 2025”, is just one of the three steps of the comprehensive plan designed to give impetus to a development based on high levels of technology. This new stage of economic progress has another new element: international cooperation and collaboration, which are crucial to the Chinese strategy. The Belt and Road initiative, 一带一路 yī dài yī lù, based on the historical Silk Road, is one of the means of international connection. The cited industrial politics are shaping and will continue to shape new international geo-political relationships, probably creating a new global balance.

2.2 THE STARTING POINT

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the strategy elaborated by the Chinese Communist Party to develop the country economy was based on investments, mainly directed to heavy industries. The plan was based on a simple mechanism: finding resources to be used as investments in heavy industry. Helped by the huge portion of available rural areas, the strategy consisted in intensifying agricultural production so that its surpluses could have been used as investments (Li and Yang, 2005). The general vision of the plan consisted in a double commitment: the enhancement of both the agricultural and the industrial sectors. A flourishing agricultural production was considered the way to ensure capital to be invested in the industrial sector (Sabattini e Santangelo, 2005). To increase agricultural production, some modifications were necessary in the agricultural system. By the end of 1956, almost every household farm was no longer independent, being now communes (Li and Yang, 2005).

Communes were not the mere upgrade of the previous farms, but a new concept of self-organisation: each of the 26,000 communes were in charge of their own agricultural and commercial activity and also of education and military organisation. In practice, each of these units had the function that until that time were typical of districts.

Inside communes, free market and private land was abolished. During the second half of 1958 it was already evident that the rural situation was in difficulty, consequently failing in its role of source of provisions to industry.

Moreover, in 1960 several natural catastrophes occurred in the country, causing around thirty millions of deaths (Sabattini e Santangelo, 2005). Therefore, the Great Leap Forward elaborated by Máo Zédōng 毛泽东 ended with opposite results: instead of fostering the economy, it resulted in a huge number of deaths for famine (Li and Yang, 2005). During these years, Chinese mortality rate increased significantly, doubling that of 1957 (Peng, 1987). The reason of this important famine is mainly attributed to the shortage of wheat availability and to the decrease of production of other cereals, on which was based Chinese nutrition (Smil, 1981). This shortage was caused by the reduction of lands destined to cereal cultivation and to wrong choices regarding agricultural techniques, which did not consider climatic conditions. Moreover, tens of millions of workers in the agricultural sector were moved to work in heavy industry, causing a lack of skilled manpower (Bramall, 2009). What also contributed to the famine is the “War against nature”, carried out by Mao Zedong, which destroyed the balance of natural ecosystems (Shapiro, 2001).

As far as heavy industry development is concerned, companies in this period were predominantly state-owned enterprises guided by the government, which was in charge of the decisions about productivity and outputs. The majority of them was inefficient and Mao's strategy of capital accumulation did not improved the industrial standards (Zhu, 2012).

The disruptive consequences of a bad planned strategy were further complicated by the governmental implementation of the Hù kǒu 户口 registration system.

Introduced in 1958, it consisted in an internal passport which marked a thick division between urban and rural inhabitants (Melander and Pelikanova, 2013). Restricting internal migration, rural populations, on whom were imposed heavy taxes, were forced to stay in the countryside. Maoist Great Leap Forward did not bring the hoped results for a set of concomitant reasons, therefore it was necessary to implement a policy of adjustments to recover Chinese economy.

The conditions left by Mao Zedong were not fertile land for the country development, which suffered also from the burst of Cultural Revolution in 1966. During these years of political and social unrest, Mao Zedong gradually loses his influence within the party, while the importance of Zhōu Ēnlái 周恩来 and Deng Xiaoping continues to grow. In the meantime China wanted to reconnect the country with the rest of the world.

This attempt coincided with the American President Nixon's wish to create a new balance among US and China. Starting in 1971 with the American ping pong team visit in China, many steps forward followed in diplomatic relationship between the two countries. The renewal of American and Chinese diplomatic relationship generated positive effects also in the Western perception of China.

In 1975, while Zhou Enlai was dealing with cancer, Deng Xiaoping was appointed as vice prime minister, being now in charge of implementing the "Four modernisation" plan drafted by Zhou Enlai, which concerned agriculture, industry, science and technology and national defence (Sabattini and Santangelo, 2005). After the death of Zhou Enlai in 1976, Deng Xiaoping experienced one year of opposition from Huá Guófēng 华国锋, who was appointed as prime minister instead of him, and the radical Gang of Four, 四人帮 Sì rén bāng. During Hua Guofeng's office, it was clear that the country was wishing for the return of Deng Xiaoping, because his politics were the most promising ones. Hua Guofeng eventually approved his reintegration, which was officialised in July 1977 (Sabattini and Santangelo, 2005).

2.3 OPENING UP REFORMS 改革开放

The visionary personality of Deng Xiaoping realised the need for a deep transformation if China wished to recover and survive into the globalising world (Spigarelli, 2018). This was a huge challenge for a country strictly embedded in a rich traditional heritage. To survive, Chinese society needed a deep and challenging transformation of the whole economic system. Deng Xiaoping took the challenge and worked for improving living standards. The new leader formulated this goal in the Opening Up reform in 1978, which was announced during the Third Plenum of The

Eleventh Central Committee in December. Not having similar examples on which to rely on, the plan was basically improved while implemented, without sticking to a rigid structure (Xu, 2011).

Reforms started in agriculture: farming system was restructured under the “household” system, in which farmers could regulate their own production and set their prices (except for the quotas destined to the government). This change generated more food availability, which was the starting fuel of economy revitalisation.

The liberalisation of the agricultural market encouraged farmers to engage in new technologies, which gave a further push to productivity. The role of agricultural sector in the economic development was very significant. Opening up reforms activated a chain of mutual benefits that spread from the agricultural sector to the whole economy. This is how the structural transformation started with the rural sector. The bigger availability of food released a big number of rural workers that was no more needed thanks to the new technologies (Jin et al., 2010). This portion of workers was employed in the non-agricultural sector, contributing to the productivity growth also in the industrial sectors, whose investments were mainly directed to heavy industry. Moreover, non state-owned enterprises were allowed to enter new sectors and to engage in market competition.

During this period industrial production was very flourishing and non-state-owned enterprises started to take ground too. The strength of non-state-owned sector, in the hands of local governments, was the autonomy from central government planning, that was usually characterised by a long term vision (Naughton, 1995). While non state-owned industry was growing, state owned one still continued to have its power. The strategy consisted of reforming the economy without raising social instability. The creation of a “Market socialism with Chinese characteristics” allowed the coexistence of socialist and capitalist traits (De Freitas, 2019).

Despite the progresses made in economy, Chinese path was not smooth: new financial difficulties arose during 1988, spreading a general uncertainty crisis, which exploded in Tiān’ānmén 天安门 massacre of June 1989. Despite some skepticism with regard to capitalism, at this point it was clear that establishing a market economy had become necessary. Tian’anmen massacre did not stop economic reforms: Deng

Xiaoping reaffirmed his willingness to proceed with the reforms, to ensure to the country a better future. After a couple of years of stabilisation, the implementation of the Opening up reforms restarted to accelerate in 1992. In 1995, competition between Chinese companies became unbearable: many of the state-owned enterprises shut down or were privatised. The biggest ones were transformed into shareholding companies, with a majority of shares controlled by the state.

During these years of reforms foreign trade and commercial exchanges with foreign countries progressively grew, reaching values never experienced by China. Foreign investments grew by 700% and transformations were implemented also all over the financial industry, involving banks and taxation (Sabattini and Santangelo, 2005).

Meanwhile, private enterprises continued to grow, especially after the 15th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party held in 1997, which was a turning point: it officially legalised the development of private enterprises. With the green light of Communist Party, private sector grew farther quickly. Thanks to the separation of business from government, investments from foreign countries increased too, benefiting from the decreased political interference (De Freitas, 2019).

2.4 EFFECTS OF THE OPENING UP REFORMS

The implementation of Deng plans were undoubtedly helped by two main factors: the considerable demographic availability, which meant availability of labour and the Chinese environmental regulations which were looser compared to other countries (De Freitas, 2019). Moreover, the desire to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO), led to the decrease of tariffs and to opening China to foreign direct investments (Branstetter and Lardy 2008).

In this positive growth situation, another key event strengthened Chinese self-esteem: in 1997 and 1999 Hong Kong and Macao returned back to China, representing a sort of closure and an important accomplishment full of symbolic meaning (Sabattini and Santangelo, 2005).

As far as foreign policy is concerned, Deng Xiaoping once again showed wisdom: his strategy was not that of imposing Chinese hegemony over the other

countries, instead he chose to keep a low profile so that the country could preserve its stability without having to waste important resources for national defence. Therefore, he was able to reduce military force so that more economic resources could have been employed in relaunching the economy (De Freitas, 2019).

The last years of the Twentieth century and the beginning of the Twenty-first century have been characterised by progressive liberalisation, modernisation, growth and dynamism, to which the Party showed commitment. Chinese people gradually conquered more freedom, also on the cultural and artistic side. New professions were born, poverty decreased, even if rural and urban gap increased. As shown, reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping did not limit to the economy, but instead reached all the sides of a whole development: economy, technology, foreign policy, politics, culture and also education. During the Cultural revolution, universities were closed, affecting the availability of human capital, thus generating a step back into a development optic. During this period education system deteriorated. Moreover, access to universities was still strongly related to social class belonging.

Recognising this system's backwardness, Deng Xiaoping in 1977 reintroduced the Gāokǎo 高考, the national examination for university access, which was suspended 15 years before. This exam allowed access to high education levels based on merit and competence. Deng also encouraged the study of foreign languages, highlighting also the importance of studying abroad (De Freitas, 2019).

The possibility to undertake university studies had an important role in shaping the level of Chinese workforce, and once again Deng showed his ability to recognise the tool necessary to a great economic development. Deng Xiaoping has been a unique leader in Chinese economic history: through his reforms he managed to transform Chinese economy into a market economy, generating benefits to the whole country, enhancing new economic sectors, reducing poverty, bringing openness, integrating China into the global market and altering the path of the country (De Freitas, 2019).

2.5 RECENT CHINESE INDUSTRIAL POLICIES

After the death of Deng Xiaoping in 1997, his reforms continued to be carried out by his successor Zhu Rongji 朱镕基. The period from 1998 to 2007 was characterised by further privatisation and trade liberalisation. As a consequence, employment increased too. The same was for productivity, because private sector could also enjoy the reallocation of state-owned enterprises' resources that closed down (Hsieh and Klenow 2009).

The entrance of China in the World Trade Organisation in November 2001 finally marked the possibility for the country to be fully involved in international trade. Since that moment, Chinese economy continued to grow at higher rates, integrating the country into global markets.

After Deng Xiaoping, the most important leader for China has been and still is Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China since 2013. During his speech for the opening ceremony of the First China International Import Expo in November 2018, he gave credit to the path toward openness undertaken by the country, recognising its centrality in the development process that has brought China to the economic giant which is now. What the President is committed to implement now, is a further and deeper economic progress for the country. Since the foundations are solid, what China hopes for itself is a further step in development and power.

Xi Jinping's strategy is made up of many different and complementary plans which all aim at transforming China into the most powerful and influential country in the world. Each of them concerns improvements in technology and its further modernisation, new levels of prosperity for the country and commercial supremacy. The willingness to achieve the hoped results has its downsides though. The focus on the internal prosperity is generating some limitations to the economic liberalisation fought for many years, at the expense of international balance.

2.5.1 MADE IN CHINA 2025 中国制造2025

Made in China 2025, is a plan issued by the Chinese government to further develop the technological industry of the country. Formalised in 2013 by Li Keqiang 李克强, former Prime Minister of PRC, it is the first step of a more comprehensive strategy called “制造强国” zhìzào qiángguó which as the Chinese name suggests, aims to push the country to a higher level of technology development and self-sufficiency.

The first step (步) is composed of “Made in China 2025” plan, which has the goal of inserting China in the ranking of the strong countries in terms of technologic power and independence, by 2025. The following step is summarised in the “Vision 2035” strategy, that seeks to consolidate the hoped reached position, whereas the last of these three steps consists of becoming the most powerful country by the centenary of the establishment of the “New China”.

China is a strong country regarding output quantity, but in terms of quality and technological advancement, products still need improvement. According to this plan, Chinese climb is supposed to push innovation, improve quality and restructuring its economic systems, especially within companies. All these paths should also pursue a green development, trying to recover the damages that China created during its fast manufacturing development (ISDP, 2018).

The basis of this plan are huge investments, directed to 4.0 technology such as artificial intelligence, robotics, cloud computing, industrial automation, advanced material and shipyard. Moreover, beyond promoting the diffusion of 5G, China is already working on the development of 6G connectivity system, aiming to play a big role in the creation of international standards for new technologies (Meta, 2022).

To reach its goals, China has to make up for its severe deficiency: human talents. Talents are crucial in this process and they constitute one of the reasons why China needs support form other countries.

The XIV five-year plan (2021-2025), approved at the end of 2021, restates also the “Dual Circulation”: Xi Jinping’s expression refers to the importance of the simultaneous growth of internal and external markets. Dual circulation consists of

working for global integration, while continuing to enhance the internal market, through the improvement of services offered and the growth of internal consumption (Vernole, 2022).

The country wants to strengthen its global influence, leaning on technology progress, eventually turning into the most influential global power. During the opening speech of the 20th Congress of the CCP, Xi Jinping promised to double the country GDP within 10 years.

2.5.2 THE “BELT AND ROAD” INITIATIVE 一带一路

Along with the implementation of the first step of 制造强国 strategy, China has created a support network and several collaboration relationships which help the country to reach its goals. The Belt and Road initiative gives China the support needed to gain access to key resources. Launched in 2019 by Xi Jinping, it aims at the creation of a structure to the development of infrastructures all along Asia and Africa that will bring benefits to the disadvantaged countries but also to China because building infrastructure will mean having foundations on which trade flows could be developed. Through this agreement, China also receives and issues investments in important sectors, which fuels Chinese plans. To fully achieve the results hoped, China needs access to highly developed technology and talents (CFR, 2023).

Chinese strength has indeed always been based on quantity more than quality, connotation that the government wishes to modify, not only to improve its products and its production processes, but probably also for set the country free from being always related to poor quality. It is possible that with “Made in China 2025”, China wants to be self-sufficient in some high-tech sectors in a way that the negative meaning associated with the expression finally turns into something positive, related to progress, innovation, exclusiveness, high quality and performance. In order to do so, the country needs support and resources, that can be reached by collaboration relationships and networks. The role of the participation of Italy in the “Belt and Road” initiative for example, is crucial to China: Italy owns the high technology processes essential to China and a considerable amount of talent on which to rely on.

Industrial development in China occurred in a short period, giving no time to build a balanced labour market from which extrapolate human talents. For these reasons the new Silk Road can be considered as a way to connect the country to potential sources.

BRI is contributing to the change of Chinese economic structures also thanks to the broader scope of incoming investments. The traditional technologic centre in China has been for a long time concentrated in coastal areas and in the major cities of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou. Now, one of the new trend arose from the BRI is indeed the new direction of investments. New cities are now under the spotlight: it is the case of Chongqing, Chengdu, Kunming, Guiyang, located in the South-West of China, that are becoming new high tech centres. This new area is well connected to the flow of the investments, as it is a terminal of railway connections with central Asia and Europe (Zorloni, 2018). Each of these city is specialised in one field: Chengdu, with its Tianfu campus, is focused on startups. This campus already hosts one of the most important “Chinese unicorns”, 独角兽 Dú jiǎo shòu, Didi Chuxing, which provides taxi rides that can be booked via mobile phone application. In Chengdu are based also Xiaomi and Meituan Dianping. Guiyang is instead the centre of big data, hosting Alibaba, Dell, Huawei, Ibm and Microsoft. Moreover, Beijing government is planning to concentrate there companies producing semiconductors (Zorloni, 2018).

The Chinese project consists also in building infrastructures that connect the country with the rest of the world, in an optic of a new globalisation era. Moreover BRI, as a valid successor of the Silk Road, plays a big role in the development of the more internal provinces of China, just like the Silk Road did with the coastal areas (De Freitas, 2019).

International arena supports BRI trough investments and collaboration. However, China ambitions are starting to generate some concerns. For example, European and Chinese agreements establish that investments among the two countries should be reciprocal. However, Europe believes that there is no perfect balance between the two-parts investments. According to Merics and Rhodium Group (2018), Europe is one of the favourite destination for Chinese FDI. Europe favours Chinese investments through its openness, whereas the same is not observed on the opposite side. According

to the agreements, there was supposed to be a reciprocity, that Europe is still calling for. This is a strategic choice made by China that generates concerns among the global audience (Zorloni, 2018).

2.6 CULTURAL VALUES EMBEDDED IN CHINESE SOCIETY

Looking at the extraordinary economic growth occurred in the last decades in China, scholars have agreed that the cultural side of the economic boom needed to be considered too. Strong cultural values have always been strictly embedded in Chinese society and scholars believe that these values play a significant role in the process of economic transformation occurred in China during the last decades.

Culture shapes values, beliefs and individual and collective behaviours of each society, determining also the way people act in the economic development. As a matter of facts, Hofstede (1980) defined culture as the “collective programming of the mind”, later called “software of mind” (Hofstede, 2011), explaining how a society’s path is shaped by its cultural values.

Experts in the field realised that the usual factors of analysis such as level of education, demographic growth, amount of investments and technological development were not enough to explain the economic boom of the Eastern world, such as that of China. The importance of traditional factors of economic analysis are not questioned, but it has been argued that also culture influences economic development. For China, of primary importance has been the Chinese strong work ethic, which is embedded in Chinese culture. Moreover, other values and behaviours have been found to be central in people attitude in working context.

2.6.1 ROLE OF CONFUCIUS IN CHINESE WORK ETHIC

Chinese society developed within a framework characterised by Confucian values, which date back to the VI century B.C. Confucius, Latinisation of 孔夫子 Kǒng fūzǐ (551-479 B.C.), also called “Master Kong” (John and Wills, 1994), was a Chinese

master who sought to spread strong values in China, with the aim of building a new order based on the integration of ancient values with new ones. Confucianism, term coined by the West, was not a religion, but it influenced and it is still influencing Chinese people in many aspects of life. The “Confucian Way” (John and Wills, 1994) gave Chinese people optimism and trust towards human nature.

Confucian values are undoubtedly reflected also in the economic and working aspect of society. Confucius teachings promote a strong work ethic, as work itself is seen as a source of dignity and success. In this perspective, work is seen as the way to overcome difficulties and achieve success. Thus, material wealth is indeed the measure of it (Chinta and Capar, 2007). Work is extremely important also for the financial support of family, which is a fundamental aspect within Chinese society. Therefore, hard work and duty are strongly embedded in Chinese culture (Shenkar and Ronen, 1987). Confucius did not want to propose a truth, instead he encouraged people to always observe virtuous behaviours. Confucian virtue is based on patience, perseverance, moderation in every aspect of life. Moreover, he stressed the importance of high education and hard work (Hofstede and Bond, 1988).

These beliefs go along with a recognised strong hierarchical society, in which each person is perfectly aware of one’s own status and respects the other societal levels. Harmony is essential and collectivism is encouraged against individualism. People work hard for the group, putting society’s needs above the individual ones.

Considering Confucian values when analysing Chinese society is of fundamental importance, as it can be observed also in contemporary Chinese people, in their beliefs, in their practices and behaviours.

2.6.2 NEO-CONFUCIAN HYPOTESIS

Herman Kahn, an American futurologist, developed the Neo-Confucian hypothesis when analysing the extraordinary economic growth of East Asia occurred in the last decades and in particular that of the Five Dragons. He started by defining East Asian countries as Neo-Confucian because of their reliance on Confucius teachings.

Kahn believed that culture played a significant role in the economic development

of these countries: the strong values connected to Confucian philosophy constituted a competitive advantage that supported growth. According to the theory, relationships between people in Chinese society are unequal and the stability of the country is based also on the acceptance of this inequality.

The five basic typologies of human relationships are characterised by a respected dichotomy. Each of these dichotomies has its own kind of correlation (Kahn, 1979). In detail, the relationship between father and son is characterised by the so called “filial piety”, which is expressed through respect, care, obedience and reverence. Between the ruler and the subject there is a connection of justice. The term “subject” refers to the person who is in a position of subordination to someone. The third human relationship is that of wife and husband, which is synthesised in the term “distinction”. Friendship is also characterised by different degrees: older friends are expected to receive more respect and devotion compared to the newest ones. Anyway, the relationship between friends is characterised by loyalty. Each of these five basic relationships entails reciprocal obligations.

Considering the meticulous care that Chinese people bestow on their family members and also on the dead ones, it is acknowledged that the role of family in China is extremely important. Family assumes in China a particular and significant position and the balance and the needs of family are considered to be priority. This conception of the institution of family in China determines specific behaviours in people, resulting to be oriented toward the underestimation of personal needs in favour of the family and collective ones. A person is primarily considered as a member of a family to which he or she has to respond. Individual’s own beliefs, needs, values, ideas, will come in the second place. This ideal of family is thought to children since the first years of life. Undoubtedly, this kind of education shapes the future behaviours of individuals also when entering into the job market. This orientation is indeed reflected also within organisations, which I would dare saying that they can be considered as a second family by workers.

According to Confucian values, respect permeates each kind of relationships between people. Keeping one’s face is a pillar in Chinese society. Losing face means losing dignity and respectability in front of the others but also losing self-esteem. This is

a very established value in China. Therefore, within the reciprocity of the relationships, there is also the mutual awareness that everyone should be able to preserve face. The counterpart, consequently, tries his best not to put the other in a situation in which he could lose it. This particular form of respect pervades all the societal spheres, therefore, when analysing behaviours within an organisation or company, one's face has to be considered.

2.6.3 HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN CHINA AND CONFUCIAN DYNAMISM

Cultural dimensions investigated by Hofstede (1990) are also found in the Eastern world. China, first of all, is a collectivistic country: family dynamics are projected also in societal dynamics. Collectivism in a society is expressed in the degree to which people act guided by collective interests. It therefore indicates the behaviour of people toward the group. In collectivistic countries, groups are very important: on one hand, groups are source of support for the individual, and on the other hand the group expect devotion from the individual.

China is also characterised by high power distance. The degree of power distance describes the behaviour toward people of different social status. In particular the degree by which a country accepts inequalities and the uneven distribution of power within a society. Therefore, a high power distance country is a country which accepts that the most powerful members of a society detain a privileged position within it (Pontiggia, 2020). Being China a high power distance country, its leaders are seen as "benevolent autocrats" (Hofstede and Bond 1988): the higher positions held by leaders and managers are not questioned by subordinates as they accept the existence of a precise hierarchy. A defined hierarchy in a company context is translated also in centralisation of power in the highest levels of the organisation and in formalisation: rules are written and well defined, leaving no space for personal initiative and interpretation.

Hofstede also explained that culture shapes the way people manage time, identifying two different ways of behaviour toward it: long term and short term orientation. As far as perception of time is concerned, China is a country oriented to long term results. This influences the way personal rewards are evaluated: efforts are focused on future results, meaning that postponing rewards and gratification is a common and natural practice among Chinese people.

Chinese business practices are also influenced by another dimension discovered by Hofstede and Bond (1988): China scores relatively high in masculinity, meaning that in business environment, competition and assertive thinking are common practice.

Uncertainty avoidance instead is not directly found within Chinese society. Hofstede defined uncertainty avoidance as a cultural dimension typical of the Western world. However, another dimension was identified in China: the so-called “Confucian Dynamism”. Confucian dynamism refers to the fact that Confucius instead of proposing a specific truth, he encouraged each individual to pursue his own path toward the search of virtue. The relationship between confucian dynamism and the dimension of uncertainty avoidance consists in the different conceptualisation of truth: countries that score high in uncertainty avoidance are used to believe in the existence of a specific truth. Grounding on this belief, these societies tend to establish clear behavioural rules to be followed. China on the contrary, leaves the seek of truth on the personal level, focusing on proposing the observance of some virtues. This is how this dimension relates to Confucianism.

The comparison between these two different conceptions of truth and virtue relates also to the role played by religion. China is a country that embraces many different religious beliefs and philosophies. This allows the country to be more open and flexible and to show a highest acceptability in terms of religion, which demonstrates the absence of a single truth.

Confucian Dynamism is a new and fresh concept compared with Confucianism seen in its traditional perspective. Considering still valid the values typical of traditional Confucianism such as perseverance, strong work ethic, thrift, high education and stability, this new dimension is enriched with an orientation toward future (Francesco, 2015).

The role of culture in this context is that of offering specific values that contribute to shaping behaviours and attitudes which are then reflected in management and in the personal approach to one's job. The participation of Chinese culture in the economic boom experienced by the nation is expressed in the concept of "Confucian Dynamism" (Franke et al., 1991). Confucian Dynamism, also referred to as "CONDYN", is defined as "the acceptance of perseverance and thrift, all without undue emphasis on tradition and social obligations which could impede business initiative" (Franke et al., 1991). The positive correlation between economic development and Confucian Dynamism means that Chinese economic activities benefit from Chinese people's strong work ethic. The difference with traditional Confucianism is that "CONDYN" respects and honours traditions without impeding innovation and flexibility. This interference of culture in economic development has been called "The Chinese Culture Connection", abbreviated with "TCCC" (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987).

2.6.4 CHINESE VALUE SURVEY

To identify and classify values that are specific of Chinese culture, the social psychologist Micheal Harris Bond carried out the Chinese Value Survey (CVS, 1987). Seven Chinese social scientists based in Hong Kong developed a list of the basic values of Chinese people. The accuracy of this survey is notable, also because it was elaborated using Chinese language so that the concept analysed were as close as possible to the understanding of Chinese people. The addressees of the survey were more than 2.000 university students in 22 different countries. Despited the limited number of recipients, this research confirms the existence of the above-mentioned values. At first, 40 values were proposed, such as: working hard, loyalty to superiors, ordering relationships by status and observing this order, patriotism, persistence, patience, adaptability, protecting "face".

The 40 values touched four different spheres: Integration, Confucian work dynamism, Human-heartedness and Moral discipline (The Chinese Culture Connection,

1987). Integration's factors included values pertinent to dynamics between individuals within the society, relationships among people that describe the degree of cohesion, solidarity and harmony. The second sphere, Confucian work dynamism, deals with values typical of Confucianism, touching the fields of morality, ethic and attitude toward the others and toward work. The third dimension, Human-heartedness, relates to gentle feelings such as patience, courtesy and kindness. The last one, Moral discipline, has to do with the capability to stay moderate, to stay in the middle without exceed and fall into excess. Recipients were asked to grade each value on a scale from 1 to 9.

The values inquired in this research have also connections with the cultural dimensions elaborated by Hofstede. They partially overlap, but they still offer a more specific insight into Chinese culture. More specifically, the first and the last dimensions of CVS respectively correlate to Hofstede's power distance and collectivism versus individualism. The third one, Human-heartedness relates with Hofstede's masculinity versus femininity. On the other hand, CVS' Confucian work dynamism does not related to any of the cultural dimensions discovered by the Dutch scholar. (The Chinese Culture Connection,1987).

2.7 LEGAL PROTECTION OF CHINESE WORKERS

Having analysed the path of the economic development in China and the cultural values embedded in Chinese society, it is useful now to look at the Chinese legislative background, which regulates the business environment of the country.

In China, workers' rights are protected by 5 different laws:

- the Labour Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC)
- the Labour Contract Law of the PRC
- the Work Safety Law of the PRC
- the Law of the PRC on prevention and Control of Occupational Diseases
- the Trade Union Law of the PRC (Eurofound & ILO, 2019).

These laws offer a legal frame within which business practice can accomplish their activities. Their articles give provisions about the amount of working hours per week,

about the supplementary working hours, about legal responsibility and also about money compensation in case of violation of Law.

The articles 36, 41, 43, 91 of the Labour Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC), 中华人民共和国劳动法 Zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó láodòng fǎ, which came into effect the 1st January of 1995, set precise rules that should be able to protect Chinese workers of each and every field.

“第三十六条 国家实行劳动者每日工作时间不超过八小时、平均每周工作时间不超过四十四小时的工时制度” (中华人民共和国劳动法, 1995).

“Dì sānshíliù tiáo guójiā shíxíng láodòng zhě měi rì gōngzuò shíjiān bù chāoguò bā xiǎoshí, píngjūn měi zhōu gōngzuò shíjiān bù chāoguò sishísi xiǎoshí de gōngshí zhìdù”
Article 36: “The State shall put into practice a working hour system wherein labourers shall work for no more than eight hours a day and no more than 44 hours a week on the average”.

“第四十一条 用人单位由于生产经营需要，经与工会和劳动者协商后可以延长工作时间，一般每日不得超过一小时；因特殊原因需要延长工作时间的，在保障劳动者身体健康的条件下延长工作时间每日不得超过三小时，但是每月不得超过三十六小时” (中华人民共和国劳动法, 1995).

“Dì sishíyī tiáo yònggrén dānwèi yóuyú shēngchǎn jīngyíng xūyào, jīng yǔ gōnghuì hé láodòng zhě xiéshāng hòu kěyǐ yáncháng gōngzuò shíjiān, yībān měi rì bùdé chāoguò yī xiǎoshí; yīn tèshū yuányīn xūyào yáncháng gōngzuò shíjiān de, zài bǎozhàng láodòng zhě shēntǐ jiànkāng de tiáojiàn xià yáncháng gōngzuò shíjiān měi rì bùdé chāoguò sān xiǎoshí, dànshì měi yuè bùdé chāoguò sānshíliù xiǎoshí”

Article 41: “The employing unit is allowed to extend working hours if necessitated by its production or business operation after consultation with the trade union and labourers, but the extended working hour shall generally not exceed one hour per day; if such extension is needed for special reasons, under the condition that the health of labourers is guaranteed, the extended hours shall not exceed three hours per day.

However, the total extension in a month shall not exceed thirty six hours.

The Article 43 stresses the impossibility to extend working hours of labourers if the provisions of this Law are violated.

Chapter XII, containing articles 90 and 91, concerns legal responsibility:

“第九十条 用人单位违反本法规定，延长劳动者工作时间的，由劳动行政部门给予警告，责令改正，并可以处以罚款”。(中华人民共和国劳动法, 1995).
“Dì jiǔshí tiáo yòng rén dān wèi wéi fǎn běn fǎ guī dìng, yán cháng láo dòng zhě gōng zuò shí jiān de, yóu láo dòng xíng zhèng bù mén jǐ yǔ jǐng gào, zé lìng gǎi zhèng, bìng kě yǐ chù yǐ fá kuǎn.”

Article 90: “Where the employing unit, in violation of the stipulations of this Law, extends the working hours of labourers, the administrative department of labour shall give it a warning, order it to make corrections and may impose a fine thereon”.

“第九十一条 用人单位有下列侵害劳动者合法权益情形之一的，由劳动行政部门责令支付劳动者的工资报酬、经济补偿，并可以责令支付赔偿金：

- (一) 克扣或者无故拖欠劳动者工资的；
- (二) 拒不支付劳动者延长工作时间工资报酬的；
- (三) 低于当地最低工资标准支付劳动者工资的；

(四) 解除劳动合同后，未依照本法规定给予劳动者经济补偿的”。(中华人民共和国劳动法, 1995).

“Dì jiǔshí yī tiáo yòng rén dān wèi yǒu xià liè qīn hài láo dòng zhě hé fǎ quán yì qíng xíng zhī yī de, yóu láo dòng xíng zhèng bù mén zé lìng zhī fù láo dòng zhě de gōng zī bào chóu, jīng jì bǔ cháng, bìng kě yǐ zé lìng zhī fù péi cháng jīn:

- (Yī) kè kòu huò zhě wú gù tuō qiǎn láo dòng zhě gōng zī de;

(èr) jù bù zhīfù láodòng zhě yáncháng gōngzuò shíjiān gōngzī bàochóu de;
(sān) dī yú dāngdì zuìdī gōngzī biāozhǔn zhīfù láodòng zhě gōngzī de;
(sì) jiěchú láodòng hétóng hòu, wèi yīzhào běn fǎ guīdìng jǐyǔ láodòng zhě jīngjì
bǔcháng de”. (中华人民共和国劳动法, 1995).

Article 91: “Where the employing unit commits any of the following acts infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of labourers, the administrative department of labour shall order it to pay labourers remuneration of wages or to make up for economic losses, and may also order it to pay compensation:

- (1) for embezzled wages or delay in paying wages to labourers without reason;
- (2) for refusing to pay labourers remuneration for the extended working hours;
- (3) for paying labourers wages below the local standard of minimum wages; or
- (4) for failing to provide labourers with economic compensations in accordance with the provisions of this Law after cancellation of labour contracts” (www.gov.cn).

The Labour Law of the PRC states that a standard working day is made up of 8 hours and that the standard working week should not exceed 44 hours on average. Moreover, workers must receive at least one day off work per week and all the statutory holidays. As far as overtime work is concerned, provisions are set also to regulate compensation in case of overtime work. The minimum compensation for overtime work is set at the 150% the regular wage. If a worker is asked to work on rest days, the minimum compensation is 200% the regular wage. If the overtime work is required during holiday days, the minimum compensation is of 300% the regular wage.

The Labour Contract Law of the People's Republic of China, 中华人民共和国劳动合同法 Zhōnghuá rénmin gònghéguó láodòng hétóng fǎ, provides further regulations over workers' rights.

“第三十一条 用人单位应当严格执行劳动定额标准，不得强迫或者变相强迫劳动者加班。用人单位安排加班的，应当按照国家有关规定向劳动者支付加

班费。”(中华人民共和国劳动合同法, 2007)

“Dì sānshíyī tiáo yòng rén dān wèi yīng dāng yáng gé zhí xíng láo dòng dìng'é biāo zhǔn, bù dé qiǎng pò huò zhě biàn xiàng qiǎng pò láo dòng zhě jiā bān. Yòng rén dān wèi ān pái jiā bān de, yīng dāng àn zhào guó jiā yǒu guān guī dìng xiàng láo dòng zhě zhī fù jiā bān fèi.”

Article 31: “The employing unit shall strictly implement the norm set for labor quota and shall not compel the workers to work overtime or do so in disguised form. If an employing unit arranges for a worker to work overtime, it shall give him overtime pay in accordance with the relevant regulations of the State”.

第六十二条 用工单位应当履行下列义务：

- (一) 执行国家劳动标准，提供相应的劳动条件和劳动保护；
- (二) 告知被派遣劳动者的工作要求和劳动报酬；
- (三) 支付加班费、绩效奖金，提供与工作岗位相关的福利待遇；
- (四) 对在岗被派遣劳动者进行工作岗位所必需的培训；
- (五) 连续用工的，实行正常的工资调整机制。

用工单位不得将被派遣劳动者再派遣到其他用人单位。(中华人民共和国劳动合同法, 2007).

Dì liùshí'èr tiáo yòng gōng dān wèi yīng dāng lǚ xíng xià liè yì wù:

- (Yī) zhí xíng guó jiā láo dòng biāo zhǔn, tíngōng xiāng yìng de láo dòng tiáo jiàn hé láo dòng bǎo hù;
 - (èr) gào zhī bèi pài qiǎn láo dòng zhě de gōng zuò yāo qiú hé láo dòng bào chóu;
 - (sān) zhī fù jiā bān fèi, jī xiào jiǎng jīn, tíngōng yǔ gōng zuò gǎng wèi xiàng guān de fú lì dài yù;
 - (sì) duì zài gǎng bèi pài qiǎn láo dòng zhě jìn xíng gōng zuò gǎng wèi suǒ bì xū de péi xùn;
 - (wǔ) lián xù yòng gōng de, shí xíng zhèng cháng de gōng zī tiáo zhèng jī zhì.
- Yòng gōng dān wèi bù dé jiāng bèi pài qiǎn láo dòng zhě zài pài qiǎn dào qí tā yòng rén dān wèi.

Article 62: “Employers shall perform the following obligations:

- (1) Implement national labor standards and provide corresponding labor conditions and labor protection;
- (2) Inform workers of their work requirements and labor remuneration;
- (3) Give overtime pay, performance bonuses and provide job-related welfare benefits;
- (4) Provide necessary training for workers on the job;
- (5) Implement a normal salary adjustment mechanism for continuous employment. Employers shall not send workers to other employers”.

“第八十五条 用人单位有下列情形之一的，由劳动行政部门责令限期支付劳动报酬、加班费或者经济补偿；劳动报酬低于当地最低工资标准的，应当支付其差额部分；逾期不支付的，责令用人单位按应付金额百分之五十以上百分之一百以下的标准向劳动者加付赔偿金：

- (一) 未按照劳动合同的约定或者国家规定及时足额支付劳动者劳动报酬的
- (二) 低于当地最低工资标准支付劳动者工资的；
- (三) 安排加班不支付加班费的；
- (四) 解除或者终止劳动合同，未依照本法规定向劳动者支付经济补偿的。”(中华人民共和国劳动合同法, 2007).

“Dì bāshíwǔ tiáo yòng rén dān wèi yǒu xià liè qíng xíng zhī yī de, yóu láo dòng xíng zhèng bù mén zé lìng xiàn qí zhī fù láo dòng bào chóu, jiā bān fèi huò zhě jīng jì bǔ cháng; láo dòng bào chóu dī yú dāng dì zuì dī gōng zī biāo zhǔn dì, yīng dāng zhī fù qí chā'é bù fèn; yú qí bù zhī fù de, zé lìng yòng rén dān wèi àn yìng fù jīn'é bǎi fēn zhī wǔ shí yī shàng bǎi fēn zhī yī bǎi yī xià de biāo zhǔn xiàng láo dòng zhě jiā fù péi cháng jīn:

- (Yī) wèi àn zhào láo dòng hé tóng de yuē dìng huò zhě guó jiā guī dìng jí shí zú é zhī fù láo dòng zhě láo dòng bào chóu de
- (èr) dī yú dāng dì zuì dī gōng zī biāo zhǔn zhī fù láo dòng zhě gōng zī de;
- (sān) ān pái jiā bān bù zhī fù jiā bān fèi de;

(si) jiěchú huòzhě zhōngzhǐ láodòng hétóng, wèi yīzhào běn fǎguī dìngxiàng láodòng zhě zhīfù jīngjì bǔcháng de.”

Article 85: “Where an employing unit commits one of the following acts, the administrative department of labor shall order it to pay the labor remuneration, give overtime pay or make other financial compensation within a time limit; if the labor remuneration is lower than the local minimum wage rate, it shall pay the difference. If it fails to make such payment at the expiration of the time limit, it shall be ordered to pay an additional compensation to the worker at a rate of not less than 50 percent but not more than 100 percent of the amount payable:

- (1) failing to pay worker’s remuneration on time and in full in accordance with the provisions of the labor contract or the provisions of the State
- (2) paying labor remuneration below the local minimum wage rate;
- (3) arranging overtime work but giving no overtime pay;
- (4) terminating a labor contract and failing to pay economic compensation to the worker in accordance with the provisions of this Law.

Knowing that in many cases overtime work is left unpaid, it is important to remember that Chinese law established these provision related to wage. The first guaranteed minimum wage in China was set in 1993. However, minimum wage is set on a regional base. In 2004, an amendment established that at least every 2 years, the law about wages has to be revised (Peng and Yang, 2016).

The law of the PRC on prevention and Control of Occupational Diseases was set in 2002, requiring employers to offer working conditions in compliance with the legislative standards and to carry out also the prevention of diseases in workplaces.

The Trade Union Law of the PRC deals with arbitration, mediation on labour disputes (Eurofound & ILO, 2019).

As far as workers’ rights protection is concerned, the intermediation role in China is played by Chinese Trade Unions. These are regulated by ACFTU (All-China Federation trade Union), which is under the control of the Communist Party of China. Regulations for Trade Unions are supplied by more than a single legislation, such as The Trade Union Law of the PRC, the Charter of China Trade Unions, the Provisions on

Collective Contracts, the Foreign Investment Law and the Labor Contract Law.

Trade Unions represent the connection between the government and the workers (Huld, 2022). Any category of worker is allowed to join a Trade Union, however they deal especially with blue-collar workers with the aim of protect them and ensure them acceptable working conditions and fair treatment.

Chinese Trade Unions are not completely independent because they are subjected to the control of the central government. Therefore, the scope of their action is more limited. For example, organising strikes and protests is not allowed.

The last amendment of the Trade Union Law of PRC has been done on the 1st of January, 2022. The change brought by has been mainly that of boosting the protection of Gig Economy's workers. Particular attention was also paid to the working hours issue. Anyway, the real contribution of this adjustment is estimated to be not so significative, because of the lack of indications about how to actuate the regulations and a poor clarity of language.

Chinese people are generally not very confident about Trade Unions considering the fact that ACFTU has been criticised in the past for being ineffective. Moreover, white-collar workers seems not to have any sort of effective protection, even after the declaration of the illegality of 996 work. According to Worker's Daily, the official newspaper of ACFTU, some of the tech giants are starting to establish their own trade unions. This is the case of JD.com and a dozen of other tech companies (Lu, 2021).

As analysed, China is provided with the necessary legislative regulations to ensure to its workers protection in workplaces. However, it is clear that in many field law is not observed. The existence of this unbalance and incoherence in the application of law shows that China is lacking on an important aspect. Laws and regulations must be put into practice given that the final aim is that of protecting workers' lives.

CHAPTER THREE

“996” WORKING HOUR SYSTEM

3.1 CHINESE OVERWORK CULTURE AND THE APPLICATION OF “996”WORKING HOUR SYSTEM

As global data show, overwork is globally spread, causing suffering, diseases and a considerable number of deaths. In Japan the incidence of the phenomenon is so high that the term “Karoshi” 過勞死 has been created to specifically refer to death caused by overwork. Overwork is not specific of a particular sector as it can be experienced in different situations, different industries, and in each and every job position. For this reason, there are many different nuances of it. For instance, long working hours undertaken in factories with poor condition for health and safety are different from the kind of overwork that occurs in financial world such as that of Wall Street or from the very recent overwork experienced by medical personnel during Covid pandemic. When thinking about China, we are aware that the extent and the seriousness of overwork is huge within the informal economy, where migrant workers accept to work under extreme condition to make ends meet and to help their families. In this industry, work is regulated by no contract at all, or by blank contracts that allow employers to behave in the most profitable way.

However, we should not underestimate the kind of overwork experienced in Chinese digital and tech companies too. In the 2000's China experienced a technological boom that gave birth to many start-ups that are now some of the most successful Chinese tech companies. Unfortunately, their success is also related to overwork. Working long hours was necessary to develop quickly and to keep up with the harsh competition. This was understandable at first, but more than 20 years later after that success has been reached, working timetable is not went back to normal standards. In Chinese digital companies overwork is still taking place and a particular system is endorsed: it is called 996 工作制 gōngzuòzhì, meaning that work starts at 9AM and ends at 9PM, for 6 days per week.

This working hours system in China was introduced in 2016 by 58.com, one of the largest online marketplaces in China. 58.com's choice was soon followed by other digital companies such as Youzan, JD.com and by the giants Baidu, Tencent, Xiaomi, Alibaba, Bytedance, to cite some (Yu, 2019). The adoption of “996” work schedule was seen necessary for startups to survive during the period of intense growth. Now, staying at work 12 hours 6 days a week is the new normality and employees are expected to do so. This working hour system is in fact so common in China that it has become a work culture and a buzzword in 2019 (Zhang, 2019).

Working 72 hours per week overcomes the limit of 44 working hours per week applied by Chinese law. For this reason, China's Supreme Court and Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security declared “996” illegal in August 2021 (Zhang, 2021). Despite this, “996” is still an important unwritten rule in high tech companies. Not only “996” is applied even if illegal, but also publicly praised by many successful entrepreneurs such as the founder of Alibaba Jack Ma, in Chinese 马云 Mǎ Yún. Jack Ma explicitly endorsed “996” culture in April 2019. On Alibaba's official Weibo account he stated that “To be able to work 996 is a huge blessing”, and that “If you want to join Alibaba, you need to be prepared to work 12 hours a day, otherwise why even bother joining”. What Jack Ma is advocating is the “Wolf Culture”, firstly cited by the founder of Huawei Rèn Zhèngfēi 任正非 who has always asked to his employees to be hungry as wolves, asking them for sacrifice to focus on their jobs (Giro, 2020). These statements demonstrate that Jack Ma and other entrepreneurs firmly believe in this culture, without even recognising that this is actually illegal and against human rights. The serious issue in this situation is that employers consider their employees as machines. They don't recognise or pretend not to recognise that, as humans, they have limits. Workers are objectified and not valued as unique individuals. If someone does not want to fit into these organisational culture and working timetable, employers can easily substitute them, inasmuch they will always find someone who would accept their conditions. In this context, it is unlikely that employers will change their mindset, therefore the only chance is a cultural change.

Through overwork, Chinese digital companies want to maximise productivity. For this reason, a lot of overtime work, 加班 jiābān, is imposed to employees.

Overtime, altogether with “996” are the new normal and constitute the “culture of overwork”.

The issue of overtime work is at the centre of the current labour market discussions. According to the National Labor Dynamics Survey more than a half of Chinese young people has an overtime job and the 40% of them are not paid for their overtime work. But it is estimated that in the tech industry the percentage is higher (WHO, ILO, 2021).

The reasons why overtime work is accepted even if often unpaid can be many. Important factors are the need to show respect to the employer and the organisation and the fear of loosing job or of being humiliated or punished. In a company where everybody accepts to work overtime it is difficult to do otherwise. Moreover, workers are motivated by the hope of being promoted. The reality though is that 40% of young Chinese workers do not even receive any compensation for overtime work and most of the remaining 60% receive bonus, points for promotions, day off work, but it is seldom to receive a fair monetary compensation, as required by law. Sometimes, workers do not even recognise overtime work: many companies decrease salaries if workers do not complete their tasks within the day. For this reason free overwork is sometimes perceived as a chance to accomplish tasks without having to deal with a salary cut (Wang et al., 2017). The message conveyed by entrepreneurs is that overwork is necessary, aspected, and it is a chance to prove value. Situation gets harder for interns, because their contracts are not well defined, and so are work schedules and job roles. Therefore interns are often exploited on the name of unclear contracts that give employers the freedom to take advantage of them.

Aware or not of the harsh rhythm imposed, entrepreneurs often provide their companies with facilities to alleviate pressure at work, such as gyms, lounges, restaurants. Seen from another prospective, this can be a way to show care about their workers and to make them perceive that for the attention demonstrated, they “owe” to the company their full dedication (Xiaotian, 2020).

3.2 WHY NAPS ARE IMPORTANT FOR CHINESE WORKERS

Considering the working rhythms of Chinese people in many different sectors, it is understandable the reason why they have the habit to recharge themselves with naps during the day also in public. This can be done everywhere, without being negatively judged by anyone. This happens also at work, especially in companies that adopt long working hour systems. Walking into offices during lunch break also means seeing many employees sleeping on their desks, on the floor, on little cot beds pulled out from under the desk. Some companies are even equipped with specific sleeping rooms. Naps are useful to keep up with the working rhythms occurring in Chinese companies and are important to recover the loss of sleep caused by overwork.

The China Nap Guide of 2021 (iiMedia Research, 2021) shows that 67,38 % of Chinese people often take a nap during the day and only the 2,13% of the population does not take naps at all. Data show how this habit is rooted in Chinese lifestyle. As a matter of fact, a nap during the day is not only a way to recover from fatigue but it is also good for memory, logical reasoning and learning. Moreover, it increases positive emotions such as motivation and energy and it lessens impulsivity. A good nap can create a mechanism of detachment and reconsideration of a problem, alleviating the burden of preoccupations (Weir, 2016).

Despite the positive impact that naps can give to workers, some Chinese entrepreneurs are recently starting to limit the possibility of taking naps in workplaces, probably because their fear to lose precious time. As an example, an e-commerce company based in Hanzhou recently banned naps at work with the excuse of being concerned of bad positions assumed by employees while napping (Zhao, 2022). The post about the event published by one of them on Weibo reached 130 millions of views, causing (Weibo.com, 2022).

3.3 “996” SYSTEM, ALL BUT PRODUCTIVE

While entrepreneurs think about maximising profits, reality shows that pushing workers to certain limits is not productive at all. The level of focus decreases when working hours increase. For example, Vouchercloud, the biggest European mobile voucher app found that UK office workers are productive only for 3 hours a day (vouchercloud.com).

“996” and overtime work lower workers' spirits and basically transform precious time into unproductive work. It is widely acknowledged that overtime decreases productivity: long working hours increase the rate of mistakes, decrease concentration and affect job performance. This is caused both by mental strain and psychological effects like poor morale and by physical consequences that overwork generates to the body.

Studying productivity related to time is very important for companies, because employees' performance definitely influence overall company performance in the long run (ILO, 2012). For these reasons, entrepreneurs should recognise these mechanisms and act accordingly.

While trying to optimise time and resources, employers often do not recognise that harsh rhythms is actually counterproductive: psychological suffering in workplaces has in fact a considerable impact in terms of productivity costs. High pressure at work is negative not only as far as human health is concerned but also with regards to economic results.

Another negative consequence of adopting extreme working timetables is the highest level of turnover among employees: working conditions are an important factor when it comes to evaluate satisfaction at work. Offering flexible timetables could be a wise way to contribute to employees work-life balance and happiness, thus resulting into more enthusiasm, more engagement and into talents retention. Therefore, caring about this aspect should not be seen as an expense but instead as an investment in human capital.

Being aware of the relationship between time and productivity means recognising human limits and finding new ways to arrange time so that best

performances and people health can coexist at the same level of importance.

There are many ways by which this could be done. For example, with regard to working schedule, workplaces should offer more flexibility, promote work-life balance and alleviate time conflicts. It is in fact proved that this balance tangibly improve performance. Work-life balance is recently became a relevant topic on a global base, however this is only the early stage of a discussion that could bring future changes.

I recognise that for many cultures it is not easy to accept the importance of work-life balance and to actually pursue it within workplaces. What is necessary is again a cultural change. Nowadays this concept even if widely discussed, is not yet receiving the hoped results. For example, a study of multinational companies in China showed that senior management is more likely to offer flexibility only if this bring them an economic return, in terms of employees attraction and retainment (Casper and Buffardi, 2004). This proves that sensitivity among entrepreneurs is still quite poor and that business choices are still guided by material gain. The path toward a fair balance between work and life is still full of obstacles.

3.4 WHAT HAPPENS IN SOME CHINESE HIGH TECH COMPANIES

The application of “996” working hour system is well known by the international audience thanks to the big resonance of the considerable number of articles published about the issue. This because the application of “996” is spread in many of the well known Chinese tech companies. “996” is in fact became known as referred to this sector. For Chinese young workers of digital companies, “996” work system is the new norm and it seems to be hard to eradicate because it is the foundation of many Chinese entrepreneurs' success. Sometimes, overwork is not even required, but employees feel forced to stay at work, just to show commitment and dedication (daxueconsulting.com, 2021).

Unfortunately, “996” is not the only working time system applied in China. In some cases the system applied is the “997”, in other cases employees have to be at work from 8 AM to 10 PM, 6 days a week (“8106”). The worst one is the so called “007” work culture, which consists of working from 0 AM to 0 PM 7 days a week. This

happens because of the possibility that the Internet gives to employers to connect with employees 24 hours a day (dauxeconsulting.com, 2021).

International press is reporting many cases of illness and death caused by overwork. One would wonder if the huge success reached by many of some powerful companies is based on the application of illegal working conditions and working timetable that push employees even to death. Moreover, the cases reported by the press are probably just the tip of the iceberg. As we know, China tries to hide the reality of facts when it comes to protect the image of the country.

Despite this, the efforts made by the press to bring to light this serious phenomenon and the death caused by it is considerable and extremely positive. There are many reasons why showing the real working conditions within companies is of fundamental importance.

Press reports many cases of death by overwork in the tech industry and it shows us that the phenomenon is occurring also in some very successful companies that provides services used every day not only all over China. Sadly, if these facts happen within the main giants of the sector, the situation in companies located in more remote areas outside of the focus of the press, is probably even more serious. To better understand what is happening in some Chinese tech giants, I chose two significative examples.

3.4.1 PINDUODUO AND TIK TOK JUST AS EXAMPLES

Established in 2015 by Colin Huang, English name for 黄峥 Huáng Zhēng, Pīn duōduō 拼多多 is a technology company which connects agricultural producers and distributors to the final consumers (pinduoduo.com). Pinduoduo has a sad and serious history as far as overwork is concerned. After the death of two of its employees one of which for suicide occurred in the same period of 2020, a worker of the company, using the nickname “Wang Taixu”, decided to speak up to make public the real conditions of overwork that the company was imposing to its workers. After seeing a colleague being transported to the hospital, the employee posted a 15-minutes video explaining the real situation on Sina Weibo, 新浪微博 Xīnlàng wēibó, one of the most popular social

media in China (Xue, 2021). In his detailed report, the employee also mentioned that the company was used to serve spoiled food for employee's lunch. "I think I can use one sentence to describe this company: it lacks the care for its employees. This is probably lacking in all major internet companies. All of these facts are real and weigh on every employee at Pinduoduo" (Xue and Pan, 2021). In the video, Wang also says that the company required to work till 300-390 hours per month.

The video went viral and arose public criticism. In one day it reached 50 million of views and social media exploded (Kuo and Li, 2021). The reaction of Pinduoduo to this "affront" was that of firing the employee for putting into circulation fake information about the company (Xue and Pan, 2021). As a consequence of what occurred, CCTV (China Central Television) refused to continue the advertising deal stipulated with Pinduoduo and communicated its cancellation (Xue, 2021).

Another company that endorses "996" working hours system is Tik Tok. Tik Tok, Dǒu yīn 抖音 in China, was developed by the company ByteDance in 2014. The owner Joshua Ma, has been talked about by many international media because of his risky decision to apply extreme working hour system also to its London division. Predictably, what happened in London was reported to be a real "exodus": around a half of the London team after episodes of heavy stress and job burnout, quitted for the excessive requests in terms of working hours by the home company. Requests consisted of working more than 12 hours per day, accomplishing unreasonable goals, always being available to catch video calls with the Chinese headquarter at any time without even considering the difference of time zone. Moreover, the company was used to deliver internal communications with examples of commitment to be followed, such as working during holidays. These requests, instead of increasing productivity as thought by Joshua Ma ended to be counter-productive, generating a real mass escape.

According to London employees what fuelled Joshua Ma's demands has been that the size and the success of the company created a sort of objectification of workers, which are easily replaceable in China. For these reasons employers often fail to pay attention to the consequences of their demands. What happened to Tik Tok workers in

London is a clear example of collision between two different ways of conceiving work (Criddle, 2022), an example of culture clash. Considering also the recent trial that many UK companies are implementing, the 4 days working week, this episode shows lack of understanding from the Chinese entrepreneurs with regards of English culture (Kollewe, 2022). The situation in the home company based in Beijing, as imagined, is even more serious.

Looking for information on the Internet about overwork, “996” and death by overwork, it is very easy to run into press articles citing famous Chinese tech companies. Beside Pinduoduo and Tik Tok, many episodes are known to be occurred also at Bilibili, Huáwèi 华为, Alibaba and many others. As far as press articles are concerned it is evident that the above mentioned companies always try to find excuses not to relate deaths of their employees to overwork.

Employees of Bilibili, a sharing video platform, used social media to make public the company demands of overwork, of work during national holidays, of unpaid overwork and the lack of possibility to enjoy the owed annual days off (Zhu, 2022).

Well known is also the promotion of a “wolf culture” at Huawei. The real concept around wolf culture, which has also its own Chinese expression 狼性, Láng xìng, Wolfishness, is that of conferring to the company values the characteristics typical of wolves in nature such as: the acute sense of smell, the resistance to cold and the strength even in starvation. These can be synthesised in the ability of identifying and catching opportunities, the ability of working hard and surviving even during harsh times (Methven, 2021). Despite the positive message that the company wants to convey, press shows that this is often translated into extreme rhythms for workers and frequent demands from the managers to employees that involve neglecting family and private life in the name of work. Also Huawei in fact leans a lot on the importance of considering the company as a family. From here derive the demands for unconditional loyalty, of which it is clear that managers often take advantage. To sum up, even if the precise number of deaths by overwork and by related suicide within Chinese high tech companies is not clear or made public, the existence of the issue is evident, unquestionable and well known on a global base.

3.5 CONFLICTING OPINIONS ABOUT “996” SYSTEM

An international debate exists over “996” working hour system. Both the international community and the Chinese audience have their opinion on this regard. During 2019 online protests started, giving life to different opinions about the topic (Cau, 2021). Knowing that launching a protest in China is not simple because of the possible repercussions, the extent of the debate around “996” is quite impressive. The starters of the protest acted smartly bypassing the control on what is published on the Internet, to finally reach a global audience before being stopped.

Using non banned means, the matter reached the West and gained the attention of many. Opinions are conflicting, but two are the main mindsets: there are people who disapprove and condemn this working attitude but there are also the ones who support it. From the point of view of Chinese high tech entrepreneurs, this working hours system is part of an established culture besides being necessary to shrink the time necessary to achieve economic goals. As a cultural feature, it has an intrinsic value, which has been normalised and is therefore extremely difficult to eradicate.

Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, even defined “996” as a “huge blessing”. The meaning ascribed to it is a sign of the cultural importance that the system has for some important figures of the business world (Wang and Shane, 2019). On his WeChat 微信 account, Jack Ma posted: “I personally think that being able to work 996 is a huge blessing,” “Many companies and many people don’t have the opportunity to work 996,” “If you don’t work 996 when you are young, when can you ever work 996?” (Horwitz, 2019). After the criticism arose against Ma’s statement on his social media account, he tried to soften the tension by saying that happiness comes from hard work (Wang and Shane, 2019). Another leading figure of Chinese business world is Richard Liu, English name for Liú Qiángdōng 刘强东, founder of JD.com company (京东, Jīngdōng). Strong competitor of Jack Ma, he is known to be another supporter of “996” working hour system (Pieranni, 2020). During the social media debate over the Chinese overwork culture, he commented on his WeChat account that “slackers are not his brothers”. Liu expressed his concerns for the attitude of nowadays workers that seek for a work-life balance at the expenses of the success of his company (Horwitz and Goh, 2019). On an

internal e-mail, Liu also communicated that employees that cannot fight for the company would have been immediately eliminated no matter their position or their performance, as well as those who are not able to fight because of scarce capabilities and those who believe to be overpaid. The internal e-mail was posted on Maimai 脉脉, a Chinese platform similar to LinkedIn by a JD.com's employee (www.weixin.qq.com).

Zhu Ning, founder and chief executive of Youzan 有赞, an e-commerce firm based in Hangzhou, referred to overwork as an absolutely normal feature of healthy companies. According to him, a firm lacking of overwork culture is symptom of deficiency or bad management. Pressure is and should be normal, to the extent that employees should even seek it when looking for employment. The HR department of his company is in fact used to inform job applicants about the strict rhythms of the workplace and to warn that long working hours are common practice there (Cyrill, 2019).

Other Chinese famous entrepreneurs expressed positively about overwork culture: this is the case of Rèn Zhèngfēi 任正非, founder of Huawei Technologies, Robin Lǐ Yànhóng 李彦宏, chief executive of Bǎidù 百度 and Bill Bishop.

Analysing international and Chinese press articles about the topic, experts ascribe to China the willingness to reach its economic goals no matter if “996” working hour system should not be followed or if overwork culture should not be encouraged.

On the other side of the debate, Liu Guohong, one of the members of the China Development Institute and Ōuyáng liáng yí 欧阳良宜, an associate professor of Peking University HSBC Business School agree on the fact that Chinese companies, especially those already mature, should not follow the examples of some successful tech giants that encourage and praise long working hours. Mǎ ruì 马睿 venture partner of 500 Startups, a company based in the Silicon Valley, speaks out against the underestimation of the seriousness of the “996” matter. She stresses the impact of overwork consequences that are affecting Japan, remembering also that long working hours are not associated to higher productivity (Millward, 2019). As far as government is concerned, its position is not totally transparent: from one side it declared that “996”

working hour system does not respect Chinese legislation, from the other side it tries to hide the problem and to contain the diffusion of online pages and social media posts concerning “996”.

It is very interesting to notice that despite the tangible negative consequences that a heavy working hour system can generate on human body, China's opinions are still divided. It is understandable that such a strong work ethic is deeply embedded in Chinese culture, but still it is quite impressive to realise that extreme working rhythms are often considered acceptable also by many workers. For many in fact, this is not a real problem. Some believe that the concept has been forced and that an unfounded “996” hype is going on. “Working hard or hardly working?”(Millward, 2019) is the title of an article that expresses an example of this controversy among Chinese tech workers. Some of them have posted Twitts describing the working routine inside some of the most famous tech companies, explaining that after all, the hours spent actually working are not so many. Dan Grover, a former employee at the Tencent 腾讯 Téngxùn WeChat office, reports its working schedule on Twitter, saying that employees can enjoy long lunches, long dinners, nap time and are also allowed to leave the office to go to the gym or to go for a run with colleagues. Nan Duan, a Riot Games' employee, talks about a considerable amount of wasted time due to inefficiencies: people stand in line waiting for elevators for almost an hour at the beginning of the day, at lunch and when going home.

Whether these employees are telling the truth or hiding it for fear, long working hours are proved to be dangerous for people's health and China seems to overlook the number of deaths occurred inside the country and in the neighbouring ones due to this obsession with work.

3.6 GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIAL STANCE ABOUT “996”: ILLEGALITY

Fortunately, despite the opinions of the business world, the Chinese Court has declared “996” working hour system illegal in 2021, as it violates Chinese labor laws (Cordon, 2021). On the 26th August 2021 the Supreme People's Court (SPC) together with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) made public a

list of 10 common cases of overtime work in high tech industry that were taken before the court, which were all won by workers. The aim of the document was that of clarifying the position of the Chinese government about working hours and the relative legal standards (www.mohrss.gov.cn). The cited cases reported examples of injustices in workplace concerning “996” working hour system, such as firing because of refusing to work under this working hour system. The paper includes also an example of death by overwork occurred in a media company: the worker died for heart attack in the bathroom of the workplace after a 12 hours night shift. The employee was used to work 300 hours every month, being able to enjoy on average only 3 days of rest per month (www.mohrss.gov.cn).

Beijing is also working for increasing punishments for the companies violating workers' rights. For example, Siemens Numerical Control Ltd. was fined for overcoming the legal maximum of working hours set by Chinese Law. Many of the company's workers were reported to have worked more than 54 hours per week and 14 people even reached 72 hours per week. These information were collected by the National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System and Beijing took action by fining the company. However the fine was just around 12,900 yuan, which corresponds to around 2,000 dollars (Ye, 2021). This shows that the system to fight these illicit practices at work is not mature enough, because it does not appropriately punish the companies who endorse extreme rhythms and illegal practices.

When “996” working hour system was declared illegal, there has been some wondering about what this should have implied in real working life. Doubts questioned the motivations behind this decision: it has been just a move to appear positively and to calm down the masses or a real demonstration of intents toward an effective improvement of working conditions? The general hope was also that of making workers feel more protected and supported by the law when it comes to denounce incorrect behaviours (Campos, 2022). The fact that the general opinion is uncertain about the real intention of this provision shows that there is a general feeling of unreliability and lack of support coming from Chinese law.

3.7 THE WESTERN SIDE OF THE DEBATE: PARALLELISM WITH THE SILICON VALLEY

In the general resentment that hits all of us when hearing news about death and illnesses caused by overwork and job burnout, some observers remind that overwork culture before being identified as a Chinese cultural feature, was spread all over the Silicon Valley and Wall Street. In China these phenomena are presumably more intense also due to the demographic size and the strong presence of the informal economy, however it is important to remember that what is happening in China is not new at all. Silicon Valley has always been obsessed with productivity and its working rhythms were brutal. Having liquid lunches, taking caffeine pills and doses of Lsd was the norm to keep up with the requested high performances. The difference is that Chinese culture and its strong work ethic had prepared its people to tolerate such routine. According to the value analysed before, Chinese people are more willing to sacrifice and more prone to self-denial in the name of the wellbeing of the family, of the group they belong to and of the company they work for (Cau, 2019).

The Western world's belief that "996" is not only present in China is well-founded. Similar conditions were widespread and still are also in some Silicon Valley's companies such as Microsoft, Amazon and Google. In the United States of America though, workers have more freedom to protest, thus more chances to be listened (Tan, 2021). Only in 2020, there were around 120 collective protests started by American high tech employees. Among them, Amazon workers were the most active in claiming their rights (Tan and Nedzhvetskaya, 2020). It is not clear whether a system similar to "996" is still applied in the Silicon Valley. For sure, common opinion is that US wealth generated within Silicon Valley had been possible because of the hard work of its workers. "Chaos monkeys", bestseller of Antonio Garcia Martinez (2016), is dedicated to show the conditions of workers within Silicon Valley.

Mike Moritz, a Silicon Valley's venture capitalist reports that in California a similar working hours system is usually endorsed by high tech startups in their first years of activity because of the need to accelerate production rate and to catch up with rivals (Moritz, 2018). Moritz is one of the venture capitalists of Sequoia Capital, a

company based in California that finances high tech giants such as Apple, Google, PayPal, Youtube (<https://www.sequoiacap.com/>). Despite the negative effects that overwork has been proved to generate, the entrepreneur still supports it, suggesting that American companies in Silicon Valley should follow the example of China. He intimates American workers to roll up their sleeves and go back working 24/7, otherwise American start ups will be eventually beaten by Chinese rivals (www.ishmaelcorner.com). Despite the general criticism Sequoia Capital received because of its position about the topic, Mortiz mentions Chinese high tech companies' work ethic as a wise example to be followed.

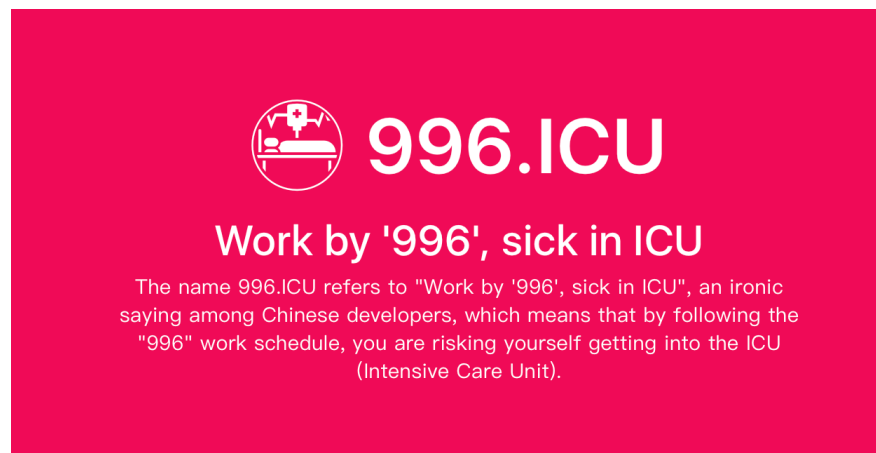
As we saw, some important exponents of the business world, both from the American and the Chinese side, seem to prioritise economic purposes even if this can be at the expense of workers. This shows that nowadays despite the scientific proofs of the damages overwork can bring on health, there is still a significant lack of sensitivity about the topic.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOW CHINESE GENERATION Z REACTS

4.1 “996.ICU”

Law seems not to condition many Chinese entrepreneurs in the high tech industry: Chinese law offered provisions about working hours and overtime work also before the declaration of “996” as illegal. Despite this many companies still impose “996” and similar systems to their workers, implicitly or not.



996.ICU manifesto (Source: 996.icu)

Feeling not protected even by law, high tech workers found their way to make their condition known to the world. On March 2019, a group of programmers created the “996.ICU” domain as a protest against the “996” working hour system. The domain was launched on the global code-sharing platform GitHub, owned by Microsoft (Pieranni, 2020). 996.ICU is the acronym of “996 Intensive Care Unit”.

The expression refers to the fact that the Intensive Care Unit is the place where Chinese high tech workers would eventually end if the working hour system will continue to be applied in companies, causing job burnout before turning to 30 years old (<https://996.icu>).

The choice of Github as the platform on which express this resentment was a smart one because being Github a platform owned by Microsoft, it allowed to overcome the barriers set by the Chinese censorship. The latter would have never allowed the circulation of such a protest on Chinese websites or social media (Modolo, 2021).

The project launched on GitHub, together with its second slogan “Developers lives matter”, gained the attention of many social platforms in China, becoming viral in a short time (Li, 2019). As a matter of facts, the China Internet Information Centre mentioned the project in its publication about the top 10 buzzword of 2019, where “996” stands at the 7th position (china.org.cn, 2019). Using a Western-owned platform, the topic reached a bigger audience, making itself known also by Western countries. For this reason, the issue quickly became of international interest.

Along with the message manifesto, it was also published a black list of companies which were applying “996” working hour system in China (Yang, 2019). Despite Chinese government blocked the page very quickly, many Chinese and International online platforms and newspaper such as Financial Times, South China Morning Post, daxueconsulting.com, 36kr.com, radii.co, caixinglobal.com confirm the popularity that the list gained in short time.

The aim of the list was also that of protecting and warning people in search for job. The creators of the protest wanted to be useful by clarifying what was the actual situation of many high tech companies and start ups. The list, whose consultation is still possible, collects the names of these companies, their location, and the kind of working hour system endorsed. Most of them are located in Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, but also in Suzhou, Tianjin, Chengdu, Fujian, Nanjing, Taiyuan, Hanzhou, Wuhan (Github, 2019). Some of the mentioned companies were the well known Huawei, Alibaba, JD.com, Suning, Pinduoduo (Lin and Zhong, 2019).

In response to these events, we, the workers of Microsoft and GitHub, support the 996.ICU movement and stand in solidarity with tech workers in China. We know this is a problem that crosses national borders. These same issues permeate across full time and contingent jobs at Microsoft and the industry as a whole. Another reason we must take a stand in solidarity with Chinese workers is that history tells us that multinational companies will pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom as they outsource jobs and take advantage of weak labor standards in the pursuit of profit. We have to come together across national boundaries to ensure just working conditions for everyone around the globe.

为了应对可能的风险，我们，作为微软和 GitHub 的员工，决定与中国的技术从业者站在统一战线，支持 996.ICU 运动。我们知道，这是一个跨越国界的问题。同样的问题也渗透到微软和整个行业的全职和临时工作中。我们必须与中国的技术从业者站在一个立场上的另一个原因是，历史告诉我们，跨国公司会把工作外包出去，利用不健全的劳动标准谋求利润最大化，迫使工人在竞次的过程中互相竞争。我们必须跨越国界，万众一心，以确保世界上的每一个人都能够获得公正的工作条件。

Screenshot of Github and Microsoft workers' letter.

(source: <https://github.com/MSWorkers/support.996.ICU>)

The American workers of GitHub and Microsoft were not indifferent to the initiative.

Pieranni (2020) reports an “episode of solidarity” form Microsoft and GitHub, whose

workers published a letter in support of the 996.ICU project and the related problematic. They declared their awareness about the working hour issue, which according to them pervades the whole high tech sector, not only in China. They called for a jointed effort to try to change the situation all over the world (Tan, 2021). On the other side, some of the Chinese companies cited in the black list, blocked the access to the domain from their browsers (Shen, 2019). Despite “996.ICU” project did not result in a concrete action in favour of working conditions in high tech industry, its role remains important in the development of the debate around the topic. “996.ICU” broke the ice for the further development of the protest, opening the way for the successive rebellion movement about the matter.

4.2 “WORKING TIME”

Few months later, four Chinese young men, inspired by the previous movement “996.ICU”, gave birth to a similar project on the Chinese platform Zhīhū 知乎. One of the co-founder explains that the original name of the campaign was “Worker Lives Matter”, but for “political sensitivity reasons” it was later changed into “Working Time” (Zhang and Li, 2021). The founders, born between 1996 and 2001, decided to carry on the work started with the previous protest because they personally experienced what the rebellion movement tried to make public. They all had been employed as interns in important Chinese tech companies. During their internships they experienced unregulated working time and bad conditions in workplaces. Their personal experience taught them that the lack of regulation and transparency in workplaces was a real matter which needed a voice.

This situation spurred them to reformulate the previous black list, making it more specific and detailed. Therefore, they decided to create an Excel spreadsheet which contained several details, such as company name, location of the company, working hours, working schedules, time allowed for meals, non paid overwork, money fines in case of delay and so on (Zhang and Li, 2021). The possibility of modifying and updating the spreadsheet anonymously allowed workers to overcome the barriers

imposed by the fear of receiving possible consequences by the company in which they were employed. Chinese white collars were asked to participate to the survey, feeling free to report their own experience at work. Started as an information tool, it quickly became a social project, a manifesto. The Excel sheet gained a lot of attention: the file was edited by thousands of users, employed in many Chinese high tech companies (Modolo, 2021). “Working time” gathered information of more than 1,100 companies, and reached in the first hours of life more than 100,000 views (He, 2021). This was just the beginning, because the project went soon viral, reaching over 10 million views (Shen, 2021). Some of the high tech companies included in the sheet were once again the well-known Tencent, Alibaba, ByteDance, Meituan, JingDong, Huawei. The average results showed that in the companies here cited, the general working hour situation consisted of working from 10 AM to 9 PM, 5 days a week. However, the project showed also that a lot of overwork was requested to workers, which eventually ended to work 6 days per week. Therefore, even though the working schedule was “officially” set at 5 days, “996” system was still being applied.

The aim of this project was that of adjusting the flaws of “996.ICU”. The main difference compared to “996.ICU” is that the platform collected also information about the Chinese tech companies that, on the contrary, promoted and applied a healthy work environment and positive working conditions, for the sake of clear information. For example, Douyin has been reported to be a company that has already given up with the six days’ working week, while Tencent established a day dedicated to health, where employees are encouraged to go home not after 6 P.M (Mazzieri, 2021). Chen (2021) reported that a “Working Time” founder wrote on Github that “Overtime is prevalent among domestic companies and there is no supervision at all, especially among internet companies,” and also: “We hope to make some contributions toward boycotting 996 and popularising 955”. The final purpose was indeed that of promoting “955” working week (working form 9 AM to 5 PM, 5 days per week). Currently, the spreadsheet is no longer modifiable, but its visualisation is still possible.

“Working time” has been a further instrument to improve the awareness of China’s working status. Reporting more detailed informations, it was a useful tool for workers to take conscious decisions when applying for a new job. Moreover, it also

gave precious instruments to Chinese and international people to enlarge the knowledge about what Chinese workers of high tech industry have to deal with when working. Another contribute or the two initiatives is the possibility to be more aware of the difference between what law states and should guarantee and what happens in the real working life. Therefore, these have been useful instruments to show the difficulty of the application of law and the understandable resentment that this situation could arise among people. The use of the Internet in this phenomenon has been a clear attempt of transparency and request for help that is deeply respectable but also worrying. These projects once again show us that poor working conditions are common not only in the manufacture sector, but also among office life, even if in different terms.

4.3 IMPACT OF THE PROTESTS

Overcoming the barriers of the Chinese Great Firewall, 防火长城 Fánghuǒ Chángchéng, the initiatives reached a huge audience, becoming a real trend within the international discussion about working conditions (Pieranni, 2020). The role of social media in this context has been of primary importance. Chinese censorship has always been very strict in controlling the flow of information on Chinese websites and social media. Chinese government does not allow the circulation of information and data that could be in some ways uncomfortable for China's image or that could undermine the official political thinking or the values promoted by the central government. Daxueconsulting (2021), a consulting agency and market research company specialised in Chinese market, reported that some hashtags like #如果每天只上8个小时班 (Rúguǒ měitiān zhǐ shàng 8 gè xiǎoshí bān), whose translation is “What if we only have to work eight hours a day”, and #大厂正点下班为什么这么难 (Dà chǎng zhèngdiǎn xiàbān wèishéme zhème nán) “Why is it so hard to leave work on time in big Chinese internet companies”, collected more than two hundred million views as of June 2021, only on the website Weibo. On Zhihu, the platform on which “Working Time” initiative was born, some discussion groups about the topic are still very popular.

996

“996”，是指工作日早9点上班，晚上9点下班，中午和晚上休息1小时（或不
到），总计10小时以上，并且一周工作6天的工作制度。这种工作方式是现在很
多中国互联网公司普遍的一种工作方式，甚至有的互联网... 查看全部内容

浏览量 11.8 亿 | 讨论量 97.4 万

父话题: 加班, 劳动关系, 剥削

子话题

Screenshot of 加班 discussion group on Zhihu platform (source: zhihu.com)

加班

指除法定或者国家规定的工作时间以外，正常工作日延长工作时间或者双休日以
及国家法定假期期间延长工作时间。 查看全部内容

浏览量 24.4 亿 | 讨论量 174 万

父话题: 工作经历, 劳动关系

子话题

Screenshot of 加班 discussion group on Zhihu platform (source: zhihu.com)

As showed by the screenshots, a group referring to “996” reached 1,18 billion views and collected 974 thousands comments. The one concerning overwork, 加班 Jiābān, is the most popular one, counting 2,44 billion views and 1,74 million comments.

One of the Chinese government newspaper, the People’s Daily, expressed its support on its Weibo account on April 2019, recognising the unfairness of “996” working hour system and showing its awareness about the difficulty for workers to refuse engaging the system. Moreover, it showed understanding by claiming that the protests against the system does not mean a lack of willingness to work nor laziness. It also recognised that improvements in the industry call for improvements of working conditions, especially now that China is trying to shift from the phase of quantity production to quality production. Therefore, it is interesting to notice that the newspaper, run by Chinese government, showed sensitivity and support, recognising that the social impact of the problem cannot be ignored (www.weibo.com).

4.4. CURRENT CHINESE EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT

Besides the strict rhythms often imposed by companies to their workers in China, the country is facing also other problematics related to the world of work. High tech industry experienced a very positive period during and immediately after Covid-19 pandemic, which has been consequently characterised also by a boom in hirings. However after this peak the sector slowed down, stabilising at a slightly reduced rhythm. The additional personnel hired during the flourishing phase became later no longer necessary, especially when the high tech market suffered from uncertainties also related to the crisis of cryptocurrency. The economic slow down caused a significative amount of lay-offs. Many experts believe that stock market does not have to influence hirings, therefore they consider this move as inappropriate (Mazzieri, 2022). Despite the considerations about the topic, reality is that Chinese job market has decreased and many high tech giants have proceeded with the planned personnel cut-offs: Alibaba, JD.com, Tencent and many others declared in 2022 their willingness to proceed with a significative staff reduction, reaching even the 15-20% of the total workers (Santucci, 2022). In this context, workload for who stays in these companies increases and finding a new job is harder than ever. According to one important Chinese online recruitment portal, 智联招聘 Zhilián zhāopìn, in 2022 less than the half of graduates received a job offer and only the 15% signed a contract. Moreover, China is experiencing unreached numbers of graduates in high tech disciplines, more than 10 million in 2022, causing an even stronger competition (Zhaopin, 2022). According to these companies however, this new phase of cautious expansion has not the aim of reducing corporate staff, but instead that of reorganising structures so that they could be able to hire more suitable talents.

Interpreting companies choices and intentions is very hard and Chinese generation Z feels abandoned and discouraged by the current job market trends. In the last couple of years media reported a frequent use of the expression 摆烂 Bǎi làn “let it rot” among this generation of workers. This is to express their feeling of discouragement arose with regards to the current job market situation. In addition, new needs characterise this generation: both for Covid-19 pandemic and the extreme

competition in this field, Chinese young high tech workers are changing priorities in life, compared with the previous generations. Last years' happenings for the majority of people contributed to deep changes in the way life is perceived. The importance of time has been deeply reconsidered and priorities have been readjusted. Therefore, besides a more proper balance between work and private life, young workers are also seeking more benefits, better working conditions, and positive environments. Emphasis on money has also decreased in favour of significance of work and flexibility. Considering that Generation Z has entered the world of work and will soon accounts for the majority of Chinese workers, their needs and demands will play a big role in shaping new possible work patterns (Piao, 2022).

4.5 “NEIJUAN” 内卷

The situation that Chinese young people are currently experiencing, characterised by fierce competition, heavy pressure from family and society as a whole, has been defined by the Anthropologist Biao Xiang as 内卷 Nèijuǎn, whose translation is “involution” (Wang and Ge, 2020). The neologism was born in 2017, referring to the increased competition caused by Chinese Rat Race (pleco.com) and it is now used to describe this mechanism of non rewarded sacrifices according to which gratifications for the efforts are not satisfying enough.

Chinese Generation Z is striving to find a meaning of this endless competition. Since school, during which competition is already very stressful, young people in China receive heavy pressure from their families, which encourage them to work hard in order to obtain a decent job to reach a better economic independence compared to them, following a process of improvement. This happens also because downwards mobility is considered as humiliating. However, once entered in the world of work, it is easy to realise that efforts are barely paid off: low salaries and strict rhythms does not reward the efforts made. The struggle is real: agreeing to the rigid working schedule spread in Chinese company requires reasonable motivations. But when reasons consists of receiving far less than what workers give both in terms of salary, working conditions and work-life balance, then it is difficult to find motivation. What is clear is that often

there is no balance between efforts and rewards.

Biao Xiang, professor at the Oxford University and director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, depicts this involution as a real trap. China needs young minds to be focalised on working hard, because without them the country would not be able to accomplish its long term economic plans (Wang and Ge, 2020). Therefore Chinese contemporary society, as many others, spurs young generation to achieve success, but in this case it is not a healthy mechanism, because being the country mainly focused on its own profits, it expects certain rhythms to be maintained, without offering proportionate rewards.

Probably, meanwhile Tang Ping supporters perceive nowadays' society as degenerating and regressing, it is easy to suppose that Chinese government and society considers them as an involution of the progresses made by China in the last decades.

4.6 “TANG PING” 躺平

In the general discontent of the recent years, Chinese Generation Z once again decided to use social media to show its dissatisfaction. Tang Ping movement, 躺平 Tǎng píng, “lying flat”, was initiated by a post of a netizen, Luo Huazhong, on the Chinese platform Bǎidù Tiēbā 百度贴吧. Luo's post was named “Lying flat is justice” and it referred to the will of just lying down in a sort of apathy with the aim of showing

refusal to accept and adjust to the current job market situation (Hsu, 2022). After quitting his job in a factory at 26 years old, the young man decided to live a frugal life, using his savings and minimising expenses,



躺平, Lying flat (Source: bbc.com)

stopping to go along with society's demands. This is how this way of thinking was born in April 2021, period during which Covid-19 pandemic have contributed to exasperate the negative feelings of young workers.

The meaning of the online social protest is that, in a context of extreme pressure on Chinese workers, especially on the youngest, the only thing to do is to lie flat: since people do not feel understood and listened, they are deciding to give up. The context in which the movement arose is the innovation race toward technology supremacy, promoted by the central government through different and complementary industrial plans such as Made in China 2025 and Vision 2035. The protest specifically rejects the consequences of China's technological and innovation goals that are relapsing on workers, especially on high tech ones (Bandurski, 2021).

The message launched by Luo Huazhong soon reached a big audience. The topic spread on Weibo and Duoban, where netizens formed a group of more than 6,000 members which showed support to the movement, called "Lying down group" (Zhang and Liu 2021). On Dòubàn 豆瓣, the discussion around Tang Ping became more structured, proposing guidelines on how to behave to rebel against overwork. One of the most popular is the "Guide to Lying Down", which illustrates the behaviours to follow when engaging in this lifestyle (Zhang and Liu 2021). Tang Ping became a buzzword in China social media since 2021 (Hsu, 2022). According to RFA, Radio free Asia, (Long, 2022), along with the diffusion of the movement, some gadgets containing Tang Ping motto also started to circulate on the main Chinese e-commerce platforms such as Táobao 淘宝 and JD.com. However, Tang Ping T-shirts, phone cases, mugs, and other items were soon removed from the market.

The core of this way of thinking is to respond with apathy and indifference to a society that requests too much to workers. Another key point of the rebellion is the denial of money as the measurement of achievement and happiness (Huffington post, 2021). Tang Ping lifestyle proposes in fact the reconsideration of professional ambitions and the reconsideration of the importance of mental health. This vision is translated into practice by working less possible or by no working at all, living with savings and cutting off the superfluous expenses, to live a life away from materialism and consumerism. Getting promoted, buying a house, getting married and having kids are no

longer life goals for Tang Ping supporters (Long, 2022). Traditional competition is rejected too, as it is part of the traditional idea of success. The New York Times (Chen, 2021) defines the movement as a “nascent counterculture movement and a backlash against China's hyper competitive work environment”.

4.6.1 HOW TANG PING IS PERCEIVED BY CHINESE SOCIETY

Tang Ping sparked interest among many Chinese people. Feelings and opinion about it have been different and discordant. Despite the limited number of the netizens that joined the online groups concerning the topic, the fact that many professors, lawyers and academics talked about it is symptom that Tang Ping raised a problem that was not new to most of them. Probably, the fact that censorship acted fast to protect the country's image and stability, has limited the scope of the protest that, with time, could have probably reached more consensus.

Tang Ping questioned some of the fundamental traditional values on which Chinese society is based: Confucian values. For this reason the phenomenon has its relevance as China does not appreciate attacks on its core principles. Within the debate, two main lines came up: the one who understands the reasons of the rebellion and the ones who reject it, considering it tremendously dishonourable.

The School of Social Development of East China University of Political Science and Law based in Shanghai, carried out a study with the aim of understanding the perception of Tang Ping among Chinese people (Hsu, 2022). The researchers developed a questionnaire, which counterposed Tang Ping (TP) behaviours against the effort-making (EM) one. The questionnaire was delivered online at www.credamo.com to around 300 Chinese people. Being the number of respondents very limited, this data do not show the actual general perception of Tang Ping, however it can be considered an interesting example. Results showed that the majority of the people interviewed has a negative attitude when referring to Tang Ping. Tang Ping was mostly evaluated as a “violation of traditional value of efforts in China”. The passive behaviour expressed by the followers of Tang Ping was generally seen as morally not approvable. Despite the negative judgement of Tang Ping attitude, respondents agreed to the fact that unfairness

and injustice in workplaces should be fought and adjusted. The sample of Chinese people who was requested to fill in the questionnaire does not suggest to accept any condition within organisations. They also recognised that the intrinsic motivation of Tang Ping could be a positive one, but they do not agree on the passive behaviours endorsed by people who promote Tang Ping.

4.6.2. GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSE TO TANG PING

The existence of Tang Ping reached also government's ears and Beijing decided to react quickly starting with the cancellation of Luo's leading post firstly published on Tieba. The “Lying flat group” was also erased and the same ending was reserved to the group on WeChat, where is no longer possible to search for the expression “lying flat”. Governmental moves were also directed to Tang Ping-related merchandising that was circulating on the main e-commerce platforms (Bandurski, 2021). Another forum on the topic, which counted more than 200,000 members was banned too (Chen, 2021). After the practical countermoves to prevent the further diffusion of the way of thinking, The Communist Party also expressed itself about the topic. Central government's worrying was the possibility of Tang Ping becoming a potential structured movement.

Chinese government has always been quick to react to popular protest, but Tang Ping is a different one. There are no people on the streets screaming for a change, there are no paper manifests to remove, no streets to block. This time, the protest is of a different kind, is silent and hidden. People express their resentment by laying down on the couches of their homes. Probably, the government is aware of the general dissatisfaction among young workers and it knows that behind the online protests is hidden a higher number of exhausted people (Chen, 2021). China needs its workers to make their best, to work for reaching the goals Beijing has set for the technological development of the country. What China does not need is having rebellion movements and people who refuse to work.

State-owned news agency Xīnhuá 新华, founded more than 90 years ago, on May 2021 published online articles expressing the Beijing vision about the matter (Wang, 2021). One of the articles claims resentments about the new group of “buddhist

young people” and calls for carefulness and for a mindful usage of words because of the ease with which people can be influenced. Through this publication, governmental press reminds the young generation which are the important values for China and demands to observe the behaviours of those young people who instead decide to work hard for their goals, continuing to pursue them without giving up nor complaining. The encouraging and at the same time judging speech wants also to remind that China is a great country, full of resources that can offer great opportunities to its citizens. China can give satisfaction and rewards to Chinese people, but working hard is necessary to self-fulfilment. Confucian values appear intrinsically: the government reminds that happiness lies in the struggle itself. Struggle is a part of life which has been characterising each and every generation. Each time has its own battle. For Chinese traditional values to lie down when things get hard is “shameful”.

With one of Xi Jinping’s article of 2021, reminding what he already said in his letter issued before the International Workers' Day of 2018, the Chinese President reminded the importance of the long term goals set for China, invoking the efforts of everyone for the common prosperity, highlighting the fact that China’s improvements had been possible thanks to hard work and commitment. He encouraged hard work and wisdom, as components of happiness. China needs the efforts of each and every citizen, with the aim of increasing the richness of the whole country while filling inequalities (An, 2018 & 中华人民共和国中央人民政府 (2021)).

Guangming Daily 光明日报 Guāngmíng rìbào, a CCP owned newspaper, expresses itself by saying that first of all, the movement of Tang Ping deserves the attention of Chinese society because of the unconventionality of the concept compared to the traditional way of thinking. The official publication follows saying that history has thought that in periods of economic transformation it is not rare to witness to the rising of some particular cultural phenomena, as a way to express feelings of discomfort about changing situations. According to Guangming Daily (Wang, 2021), Tang Ping was moved both by economic and social transformations occurring in the last years in China. On one side, the race toward innovation in the technological sector has led to structural changes that generated an intensification of competition, whose consequences have fell to workers. On the other side, the improvement of Chinese living standard and

the general increase of opportunities made it possible for some people to choose their lifestyle. The paper however, wants to remind that the choice of running away from pressure has consequences on the economic development and stability of the country.

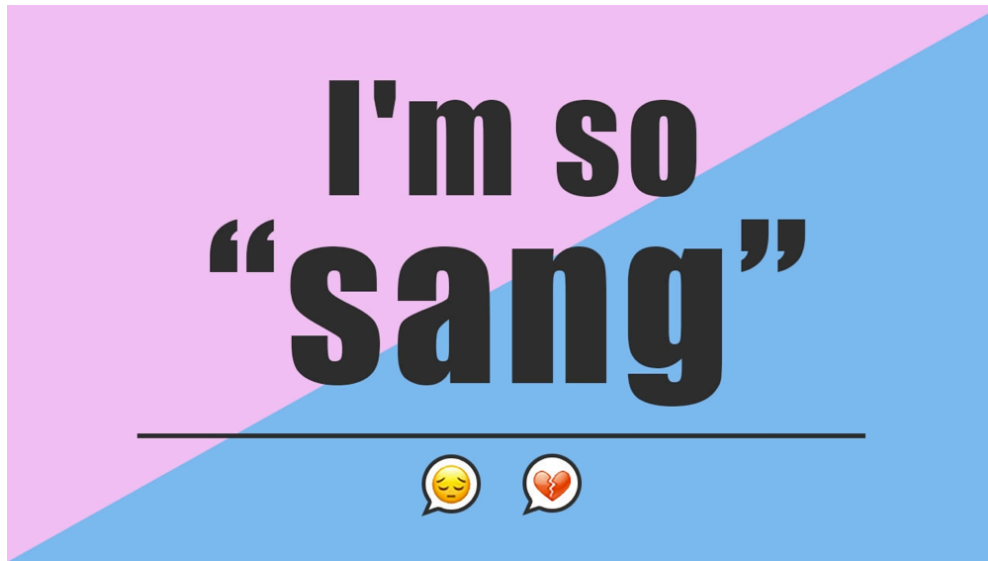
Young workers are fundamental for maintaining the development pace and for reaching important goals. For this reason, the government needs not to ignore the existence of this situation, in order to prevent any possible deterioration. The point of view of Guangming daily is not judgemental: the press agency wants to express its understanding: The choice of living a slower life has to be respected. The government needs to understand the point of view of Tang Ping supporters and instead of blaming them, trying to create a better working environment and promoting healthy competition. Young workers have to be valorised and rewarded also economically and their self-fulfilment nourished. To sum up, the aim should be that of allowing workers to benefit from the innovation they are, by working hard, making possible.

4.7 TANG PING'S ROOTS

4.7.1 "SANG" CULTURE

Tang Ping movement has its roots in the Sang culture 桑文化 Sāng wénhuà. Sang Culture became popular around 2017, representing the feeling of young people belonging to the Chinese urban middle class. Even if this cultural movement may not be representative of the entire Chinese young generation, it has been very popular online and it entails the existence of a social problematic. Reasons of the discomfort felt by generation Z were the same as that of Tang Ping supporters: increased competition in labour market, increased pressure from society and family and the rising costs of living, especially with regards to housing. Discouragement also comes from the perspective of a life spent at work, especially now that retirement age is being deferred.

All these reasons generate a feeling of helplessness with which Chinese Generation Z deals by deciding not to do anything. Instead of reacting and finding a way, they chose apathy and resignation. From this it comes their weak work ethic and the choice not to accept overwork and "996" system (Wang, 2017).



source: Wang Jia/ CCTN Photo

Sang mindset aims at reducing the stress of living; it is in turn inspired to Xiǎoquèxìng 小确幸 the movement that was based on the importance of the appreciation of the little moments instead of focusing on reaching big goals or material things.

Sang found a lot of support also in Japan, where many movies and books have been produced and published about the topic to express this way of thinking typical of Generation Z. The diffusion of Sang culture was already an indicator of a social problem: the mechanism of escaping and rejecting society's requested behaviours can be also considered as a coping mechanism (Zeng, 2017). Guangming daily reminded that society, government and school should put their efforts to “引导青年人远离“丧文化”侵蚀” Yǐndǎo qīngnián rén yuǎnlí “sàng wénhuà” qīnshí, “guide young people away from the erosion of the “culture of mourning”. As far as education is concerned, the role of these institutions should be not only that of teaching notions, but also helping them to develop a positive mindset, making people feel enthusiastic to serve the country (Xia, 2016).

4.7.2 “FIRE” AND ITS DIFFUSION IN CHINA

On the other side of the globe, in the United States of America, beliefs similar to those of Tang Ping were born already in the last decade of the 90’s. In 1992, the publication of the book “Your Money or Your Life”, wrote by Vicky Robin and Joe Dominguez, generated among Us citizens second thoughts about the role of work and the meaning of money in life (Li, 2020). This book is where are born the essential ideas on which the FIRE movement, acronym for “Financial Independence, Retire Early” is



Source: investopedia.com

based on. Vicky Robin, born in 1945 and graduated at Brown University at 22 years old met during a trip in Us and Mexico Joe Dominguez, a Wall Street financial analyst who retired at 31 years old.

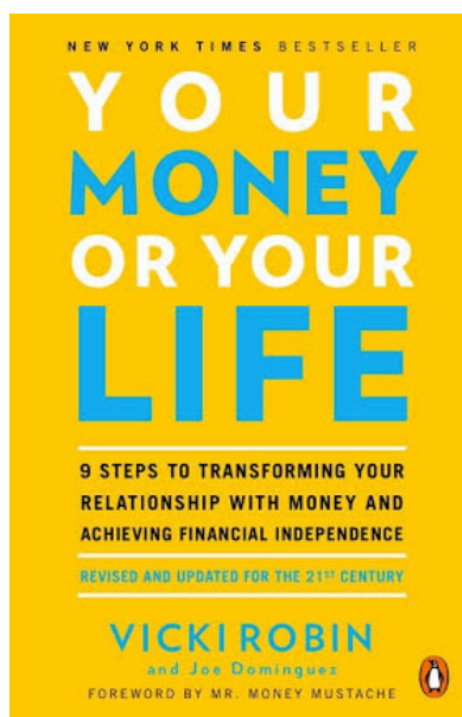
Being both disillusioned by the world of work, they decided to change their lifestyle and to live only with some passive revenues coming from some investments. They decided to develop some workshops about financial independence and to finally write their bestseller as a guide to help people changing their relationship with money (p2pinvesting.it).

In 2011 the popularity of FIRE movement has been enhanced by Peter Adeney, the blogger known online as Mr. Money Mustache. His story is similar to that of the best seller’s writers as he also retired from his software engineer job at the age of 30 to live a frugal life supported by savings and investments. On his blog born in 2011, Mr. Money Mustache shares his beliefs giving advices on how to manage this life choice (mrmoneymustache.com).

In 2018, a small group of Chinese netizens started to translate articles about FIRE, posting them on Chinese social platforms. Two years later, many FIRE communities of Chinese young people, especially workers of tech industry, started to pop out. On Douban, one of this group gained 8,000 members in few weeks. According to the financial blogger Riesling Li, FIRE is “a side effect of 996 culture” (Li, 2020). Whether approaching to the teachings of FIRE can be considered a wise choice or not, it is not easy to predict. For sure this is a hazardous choice, especially considering the rapid change of current times and the uncertainty that pervades the whole world. Riesling Li said “China, with its basic social safety net, turbulent markets, and rapidly increasing cost of living, is also a risky place to play with FIRE, “A big illness could cut your savings in half” and again, “The plan is far from perfect.” (Li, 2020).

4.7.2.1 “YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE”

“Your money or your life”(2008) encourages readers to reflect about their personal relationship with money, with the final aim of offering support during the process toward financial independence, which consists of having more time to be spent in what makes people happy, fulfilled, accomplished. Offering some reflection steps and self tests, the book guides the reader to a deeper understanding of the substance of personal values, personal needs and perception of money. The book starts with stating something real and sad at the same time: many people feel that they cannot chose between life and money.



Bookcover(Source:yourmoneyoryourlife.com)

This paragraph in the book is named “We aren’t making a living, we are making a dying”: a strong sentence that summarises this problem. Life should not be based on the left over time after work, which is usually spent recovering from stress and fatigue or overthinking about the poor quality of life.

Many other identify themselves with their job. Unfortunately, this attitude is so widespread that it has been normalised. It is sufficient to notice that we all use the verb “be” when referring to one’s work or work position. People identify themselves as their job to the point that they consider themselves as successful depending on how “important” is the job. For who instead has a fulfilling job, behaviours of workaholism often appear. Workaholic people manifest their addiction also by showing off their job-related stress.

The book touches also the cultural aspect of money and abundance: the meaning of money has also a personal nuance. In this general context, the book addresses to the reader some questions about fulfilment, satisfaction, values. The way to measure the worth of actions is to weight up the energy spent in doing something and the value of the action for the individual. Later on, the book invites to wonder about what is the real purpose of a person and how energy expenditures would change if there would be no more need to work.

Another sad aspect that emerges from the reading is that people often spend money for superfluous things or activities just because of the need to receive in some way a bit of gratification: while running after money, people are often not conscious that many of these expenditures are actually avoidable if only the person in question was satisfied. These expenditures are defined in the book as “cheap thrills”: rewards from the external world, opposed to the “deep thrills”, which come instead from the satisfaction of one’s inner aspirations. This is the reason why probably expenditures would decrease if one could avoid to work to make a living.

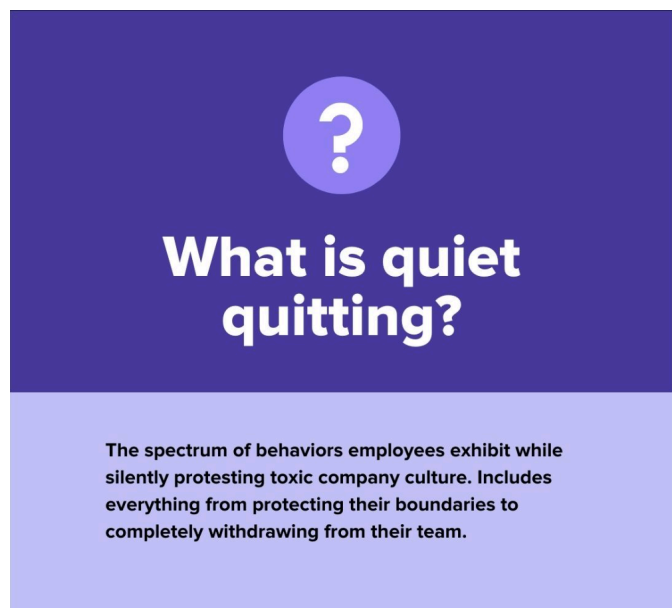
The key to break this mechanism is to develop awareness, which has to be used to give a direction to decisions. Here arises another observation: there is often a lack of recognition that most of the personal decisions are actually strongly influenced and guided by other people and society in general. And beyond decisions, this is true also for the evaluation scale people use to measure personal actions and achievements. But

fulfilment is not found in what other individuals perceive as fulfilling: it comes from the inside. This is where awareness comes into play.

Practically speaking, the book wants to spur people to stop pleasing the others, especially when what the others want for you is miles away from what you really hope. Always remembering one's value, which are defined by the book as "an ethical DNA", is the key to find the personal path that fits with one's values. Summarising, the book plumbs many aspect of the perception and role of money in life. During the reading, many doubts emerge about the meaning of our actions. The last section of the book is dedicated to show the benefits of living a frugal life, the lifestyle which has inspired the FIRE movement.

4.8 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN "QUIET QUITTING" AND "GEAT RESIGNATION" WITH CHINA

Together with Tang Ping, Sang and Fire the diffusion of "Quiet quitting" also witnesses the broadness of the dissatisfaction about work life. Quiet quitting is a workplace trend born in Usa during 2022, partially inspired by the Chinese Tang Ping (Foster, 2022). Who embraces Quiet Quitting decides not to excessively engage with work, but to do instead just what is strictly necessary, strictly demanded by the main job's tasks. This is not a real retirement but it shows the symptoms of the willingness to do that. The adjective "quiet" refers in fact to the difficulty for employers to recognise this tendency among their workers. That's why many guidelines have been developed to help reading the signs of the presence of the phenomenon in workplaces (Gafner, 2022). Quiet quitting has is roots also in the Great Resignation. According to Randstat (2022), Great Resignation is a



worldwide phenomenon that consists in choosing to quit the job for reasons like low engagement, scarce flexibility of work schedule, the feeling of not being satisfied with the job's tasks and a gap between personal and organisational values. The main actor of this phenomenon is once again Generation Z, which prefers to lose job rather than happiness. This movement can be considered less extreme compared to Tang Ping or FIRE because it does not condemn work itself, but it aims at finding a way to be truly happy and a job that meets personal expectations, contributing to a better work-life balance.

4.9 IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A European Parliament's report (2022) gives credit to mental health issues related to work for the current health crisis occurring in the recent years all over Europe and expresses its concerns especially about young people. Certainly, mental health in workplaces suffered also from the Covid-19 pandemic's impact. The European Institution recognises the changes generated by the pandemic on workers' lives. It is also aware of the benefits in terms of a better balance between work and private life brought by smart working, but also of its negative sides such as that of over-connection and the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. With smart working became necessary during the sanitary emergency, conflicting opinions arose about it. From one side it represented a new positive way to give continuity to jobs, but on the other side it has been realised that smart working was not so healthy as it seemed at the beginning. As a solution to a problem carries its own complications, working from home started to erode boundaries between job life and personal life. If it was already usual for workers to worry about job-related issues also when at home, during the pandemic there was no possibility to escape neither from home nor from work. Smart working could be an instrument with a huge positive potential but in many cases it has been badly managed and also misused. Being under lockdown meant for many being available at any time, no matter what. This is how in my opinion, Covid has worsened mental health related to job.

This consequences increase the burden already caused by other stressors such as

financial insecurity, fear of losing job and the increased use of technology. All these changes have been even more harsh for young people who were finishing their studies and were preparing to enter the work world. As far as the global situation is concerned, Covid-19 caused a rise of 25% of anxiety and depression. The most hit have been women and young people (WHO, 2022).

According to OECD (2021), 64% of young people between the age of 18 and 34 years was in 2021 under risk of depression caused by worrying of their financial and occupational future perspectives. The World Health Organisation declared in fact that Covid-19 gave origins to a mental health global crisis (WHO, 2022).

4.10 TOWARDS A CHANGE ?

Nowadays everything has to be available 24/7. This fast and immediate way of living has consequences on workers. If this situation was already hard to handle before the burst of Covid-19 pandemic, post Covid situation is even worse, especially for those who misuse smart working. Working at home could be very revolutionary, but it can also blur boundaries between work and private life, transforming “996” into working 24/7. The hours worked at home are hard to calculate and being a new way of working, there are no regulations to be observed by employers or to be protected by trade unions.

Aware of this new working pattern, of the delicate employment situation and of the importance of mental health preservation, the European Parliament report (2022) calls for action to ensure to young worker an easier entrance to occupation and conveys its willingness to support workers' health. The document advocates the importance of prevention for possible future problematics within organisations. Then, it focuses the attention on the “disconnection right”, which is fundamental for the wellbeing of workers.

Also the Italian sensitivity about this topic is growing and a positive working environment is becoming a priority, especially for young workers. As a matter of fact, according to Mindwork (2002), 7 Italians out of 10 make choices about companies based on their attention to psychological well being. The awareness on this important issue has been surely increased by Covid pandemic, which worsened general mental

health conditions and mental well-being related to job. The positive outcome of this crisis has been the increased sensitivity on the topic, which has also enhanced governments and organisations' commitment to improve mental health in workplaces.

As discussed in the World day for Safety and Health at work 2022 conference posted on ILO's website, governments, together with employers and workers are working hard to provide more efficient monitoring systems, assistance, training and support to prevent mental health problems related to job (ILO, 2022). This mission is focused on making sure that written directives about mental health are actually implemented in organisations. The International Labour Organisations claimed its awareness of the fact that many diseases, suffering and deaths caused by work or occurred in workplaces were avoidable. For this reason it is important to implement the so-called "preventive culture".

"Preventive culture" is defined by ILO's Convention number 187 as "a culture in which the rights to a safe and healthy working environment is respected at all levels and where governments, employers and workers actively participate in securing a safe and healthy working environment through a system of defined rights, responsibilities and duties" (ILO, 2006). This means working to ensure the application in workplaces of the directives promulgated by governments and international organisations. There is the need and the urgency to put into practice what is recommended by regulations and to train employees to identify unhealthy dynamics that represents potential risks. Another important point is the need of working environments in which workers feel free to report dysfunctions to the management. Summarising, governments together with companies and workers have to work together for the common good.

While European governments are working on the establishment of a "disconnection right", China seems far from that considering also the interference of the long term goals of Chinese economic plan which would probably increase workload for employees. Being China primarily focused on economic plans aimed to technology supremacy, it will be hard for the country to keep the fast paces of production while concentrating also on workers' mental health protection.

Moreover, China has demonstrated a lack of understanding of mental health importance. Despite the improvements China made in the last twenty years joining

many plans for the enhancement of mental health system, many incongruences transpire in the way this sector has been managed. First of all, knowledge about this fundamental area of medicine is very low across the country (Smith, 2020), secondly there is a paucity of specialised professional workers of the field. Moreover, access to mental health care is still unbalanced: rural inhabitants are disadvantaged compared to urban one. This is considered to be the most serious problem related to the topic (Liu et al., 2021). Last but not least, government's position is not completely transparent, because the budget dedicated to mental health accounts for a limited percentage of the total one (WTO, 2004).

In this general overview, progresses are still needed in China as far as building a well structured and complete mental health care system is concerned.

In my opinion, China has always been a country strongly concentrated on economic performance, sometimes at the expense of people. This attitude caused a lack of focus on people's wellbeing, in this case on mental health. The hope is that pressure from cooperation agreements stipulated with the Western world will stimulate the country to adjust its system.

4.11 THE SHORTER WORKING WEEK

Besides the existence of several movements expressing nowadays' resentment about the current employment environment, we are all aware that this topic is very popular in the last couple of years. Work-life balance is now almost on everyone's lips and global press continues to publish articles about it. It is assumable that Covid-19 has generated a new kind of awareness, thus creating a real trend. Due to the increased relevance of the topic, many countries are now considering new ways of organising work so that employers can be more satisfied and happy.

Currently, many countries are testing the feasibility of the "Four days work week". These include many European countries, especially Finland, Sweden and Denmark, but also Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, many companies all over the world are independently carrying out their own trials (World population review, 2023).

The 4 days work week initiative was born in 2018 with the creation of the 4 Day Week Global, a nonprofit organisation founded by Andrew Barnes and Charlotte Lockhart. Its function was that of proposing a platform with the aim of gathering support for a project that could change the future of work (www.4dayweek.com). The final purpose of the initiative can be summarised into reducing the working week from 5 to 4 days per week, switching to 32 hours per week.

According to the research organisation Autonomy the initiative has been a response to some current trends occurring in the business environment. These trends include: the wide presence of precarious work, inequalities, the advancement of automation in workplaces and the reconsideration of work-life balance.

4 Day Week Global displayed how reducing the working week positive effects will be evident not only on people's wellbeing, but also on the environment, as it would reduce pollution, contributing to the containment of carbon dioxide's footprint (www.autonomy.work). Some of these signatures collected by the project also came from employees of important companies such as Google, Amazon, Sephora, Marriott, Ikea, McDonald's, Toyota, Tesla, Uniqlo, Zurich Insurance and many other.

Joe O' Connor, chief executive of 4 Day Week Global, wanted to adjust to the changed business world, which is now showing a need for reshaping the balance between work and life. The newly proposed working week arrangement is based on a formula: the 100:80:100 model. The equation entails keeping the full pay (100%) while shortening the working week, decreasing to the 80% of the normally worked hours, with the result of 100% of the performance.

The actualisation of the shorter work week would bring benefits to many different levels: not only for the business world but also for society in general and the environment. Covid-19 generated a change in the priorities. This change calls for a transformation also of organisations' management (Kollewe, 2022.) Besides increasing productivity and performance, companies would be more able to offer a healthy environment, which would also result in a greater attractiveness for talents. Secondly, having a more balanced life and more free time, people would have more occasions to travel and to sustain the economy. This choice would generate collateral advantages also to physical health: individuals would have the possibility to carefully select their food,

making more sustainable and healthier choices such as cooking fresh meals instead of consuming fast food and walking or riding the bike instead of using car. Moreover, people would have more time to nourish relationships, with positive results for the community internal bonding (<https://www.4dayweek.co.uk/>).

According to the sociology professor of Boston College Juliet Schor, this trial can be considered as historical. The response on employees will be measured according to multiple factors such as energy level, sleep quality, burnout risk, life satisfaction. The rise of initiatives concerning working hours arrangements is a symptom of a widespread discomfort that requires a radical change (Kollewe, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Recent years have been filled with important changes concerning the global economy and the burst of Covid-19 pandemic has further unsettled international balance. In a changing global economic, political and social environment, each country experienced deep alterations in its fabric. The element that combines each country of the world is the need of an internal adjustment, generated by the transformations occurred during and after the pandemic.

While relaunching the economy, an important need arises: not to neglect that Covid-19 pandemic brought changes in how people conceive work-life balance. Several researches demonstrate that a reconsideration of the role of work is occurring on a global base. The significative amount of time spent at home during lockdown forced people to rethink their relationship with work. In many cases this consideration resulted in a new awareness that cannot be ignored by governments and organisations. There is a call for a new balance, which requires a renovation of organisational management. Covid-19 has also generated a greater awareness about mental health and its relationship with work.

These two changes, together with the benefits of digitalisation experienced during the lockdown, can be summarised in a new consciousness. International organisation have so far showed understanding and support about the topic and are committing to improve working environments to meet the needs of the changed mindset, especially that of the youngest workers.

2022 World day for Safety and Health at work focused on the topic and reminded the importance of the “preventive culture” (C187, 2006) and the fundamental role of the collaboration between government, organisations and workers for implementing in workplaces the new directives.

Considering these changes in the common conception of work, what is expected by institutions and organisations is an improvement of working environment and a better balance between work and private life. In this regard, some countries are trying to spur some initiatives to reduce working days. This attempt is based on the willingness of implementing and putting into practice the recently developed awareness.

However, it is not easy to investigate the real intention of actualising this desire, considering also the need of relaunching the economy: it is difficult to predict the willingness of governments and companies of prioritising workers' wellbeing instead of productivity.

The struggle that Chinese labour market is experiencing is resulting in the development of a new consciousness. The opening towards the Western world, together with the difficulties occurring in Chinese labour market generated a fracture with the past as far as their priorities are concerned. Chinese young generation is starting to perceive a disillusionment: previous generations were optimistic about China economic potentiality and its possible career opportunities. Being confident about the future, they offered total commitment and dedication to this ideal. As a matter of fact Chinese economy has been completely transformed in the last decades, as well as life conditions and living standards. Powered by the praiseworthy results within this transformation, Chinese government is still setting new growth goals. Aware of its potential, China fuels its desires to overcome Western countries. Competition and the current economic growth stagnation puts pressure on workers.

However, new generations appear less bounded to Chinese traditional values, especially as far as total commitment to work ethic is concerned. Economic modernisation and the opening toward the West have probably also contributed to the development of a new conceptualisation of the role of work among Chinese Generation Z. For sure, Covid pandemic's impact on the development of this value change is significative. The recent developed Chinese movements that represent a discomfort and a request for change are small but representative: first of all, the censorship block imposed on the social media diffusion of this expression has downsized the number of potential supports. Secondly, the fact that the extent of the debate around 996 working hour system and Tang Ping movement has reached international attention entails a recognition of a social problem that must be taken in consideration. Moreover, Western counterpart shows the same dissatisfaction as we saw with Quiet Quitting, Great Resignation and FIRE movements. This is the proof of a global feeling.

What is aspected now is a standpoint from governments. Undoubtedly the first step to accomplish will be to ensure the observance of law, together with its application

in workplaces. Secondly, it is important that institutions recognise the change of people's need and that they work for the adjustments of what actually happens in the labour market, with the aim of offering the best conditions for workers, so that the best work-life balance is guaranteed.

Undoubtedly, this is much more complicated for China, a country in which economic ambitions and cultural values are focused primarily on economic results. However, the closeness of China to Western countries through international organisations and the daily confrontation with the West could be a stimulus for the country to move towards change, encouraging open-mindedness and a greater consideration of people's changed desires.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all those who
have always been
there,
to perseverance,
to dreams,
to the beauty of the
unknown,
to the future.

ACRONYMS

ACTFU: All-China Federation Trade Union
BRI: Belt and Road Initiative
CCTV: China Central Television
CONDYIN: Confucian Dynamism
CVS: Chinese Value Survey
FIRE: Financial Independence, Retire Early
ICD-11: International Classification of Diseases 11
ICD-10: International Classification of Diseases 10
ILO: International Labour Organisation
MBI: Maslach Burnout Inventory
MOHRSS: Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security
OCS: Organisational Checkup System
OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCSE)
PRC: People's Republic of China
RFA: Radio Free Asia
SPC: Supreme People's Court
TCCC: The Chinese Culture Connection
WHO: World Health Organisation
WTO: World Trade Organisation

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