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Work-Family Conflict and the Commodification of Women's Employment in Three Chinese Airlines

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Abstract

In the East, where gender is mediated by different family structures, societal institutions and economic development, the work family conflict (WFC) metaphor remains appropriate. This paper investigates Chinese women's experiences of WFC in the fastest growing commercial airline sector in the world. It finds that, in contrast to the West, work-to-family, rather than family-to-work conflict dominates. Liberalization, competition and commercialization have also had a significant gendered impact on jobs. The latter resulting in the commodification of women's aesthetic and emotional labour, job segregation, employment insecurity, poor career opportunities and increased WFC. We explore reasons why HR policies and practices in airlines fail to address women's workplace concerns and find that occupational status and lack of organizational power, together with the prevalence of traditional gendered norms and attitudes, play important roles.

Key Words

Chinese airlines; women's work-family conflict; aesthetic labour; emotional labour;

liberalization; commodification

Introduction

This paper examines women's experiences of work-family conflict (WFC) in three Chinese airlines. Studies of WFC in China are relatively few compared with the West, though since the 1990s, debates in the latter have been reconceptualized around the more gender-neutral concept of 'work–life balance' (WLB). This shift in terminology reflects historic, social and cultural developments in the West. Lewis et al. (2007, p.360-363), however, question the extent to which the WLB metaphor serves to obscure gendered assumptions, practices and dynamics and can be applied cross-culturally. In the East, where gender is mediated by very different family structures, societal institutions and economic development, it is, we believe, still important to focus on WFC. Enduring and deeply held cultural convictions see family as a woman's domain and the public sphere of paid work as predominantly male, thus balancing work and family are still very much a woman's concern (Lewis et al. 2007; Hassan 2010; Chandra 2012). The importance of context, when evaluating the potential for workplace policies and practices to address WFC/WLB issues cannot be stressed enough. Debates in the West for example, often assume WLB can be facilitated through policies that enhance flexibility and individual choice (Lewis et al. 2007), but in traditionally collectivist cultures such as China, this correlation is much more complex.

Our choice of the airline industry in China as a research site, was influenced by Western research that has produced significant findings on women's experiences of gendered occupational segregation, femininized emotional labour and gendered organizational cultures (Taylor and Tyler 2000; Mills and Mills 2000; Mills 2006). This employment context is also characterized by unsocial working hours and shift work, generally regarded as key contributors to WFC (see discussion below). China's airline industry is the fastest growing aviation and passenger transportation market in the world (Hays 2012) and a major employer of women. Given the standardisation of airline operations worldwide, it therefore provides a valuable context in which to investigate the impact of national and organizational level practices on women's lives. While state owned airlines continue to dominate (Liu 2007), importantly, the state in China no longer intervenes in the day-to-day employment relationship (Cooke 2011a). Competition and commercialization have increased the importance of the individual 'customer' (typically characterized as male). As a consequence, commercial advantage has increasingly been sought at the level of the gendered service encounter (Author and Author 2011).

Our study has three key objectives. First, to identify the main sources and consequences of WFC for women in the Chinese airline industry. We do this through an analysis of the WFC literature in the West and the East and findings from our primary research. The second, is to explore the extent to which jobs in airlines

are gendered, the importance of women's emotional and aesthetic labour in this process and any interrelationship between WFC and commercialization. Third, we investigate what, if any, HR policies and practices could address or mitigate WFC, and whether these are present in our three case study airlines. Drawing on the above findings, our conclusion considers the broader potential implications for understanding gender issues and tackling gender inequality in the Chinese context, for as Shen et al (2009 p.247) state, research in "transitional economies is urgently needed….to develop a better understanding of the effects of different socio-cultural environments on diversity management".

Women's WFC: causes and consequences

WFC can be bi-directional - that is, from work to family and from family to work. In the West key *work*-related contributors to WFC have been identified as including, inflexible, long or non-conventional working hours (Colligan and Rosa 1990; Wilson et al. 2007); job demands that require sustained physical and/or psychological/ emotional effort (Demerouti et al. 2005); difficulties relating to leave entitlement and, gendered organizational cultures (Shelton 1992; Halford, Savage and Witz 1997; Cross 2008). Key Western *family* related factors are childcare, the unequal domestic division of labour between men and women and lack of family or social support (Hewlett 2007; Premeaux et al. 2007; Crompton and Lyonette 2011). 'Social support' includes the availability of state welfare and childcare, although the age and

number of children in a household has also been shown to be significant (Aryee 1992; Carlson 1999; Crompton et al. 2005).

The negative effects of WFC documented in the West in terms of *work* outcomes include, lower productivity, increased absenteeism, higher levels of turnover, and greater job dissatisfaction.   In terms of *family* outcomes, reduced marital and family satisfaction feature amongst negative outcomes (Allen et al. 2000; Frone 2003; Hammer et al. 2003; Eby et al. 2005; Greenhaus et al. 2006; Fikensenbaum 2014). In the East, studies have shown that work interference with family is lower than in the West, but that family interference with work can be higher. Hassan's (2010) comparison of WFC in Malaysia and the West, for example, illustrates the importance of family in an individual's life in eastern cultures.

In China, long working hours, overtime, shift systems and insufficient support from *work* have been found to be major contributors to women's WFC (Li 2003). Economic re-structuring and changes in the employment relationship have increased job demands which, coupled with deeply-embedded Chinese cultural values and weak social awareness of gender equality, have given rise to an increase in women's WFC (Cong 2003; Wei 2002; Cooke 2005, 2009).   Market liberalization has generated poor incentives, uncertain income, and a stronger attachment to domestic roles amongst some Chinese women wanting to escape a competitive labour market (Zou 2007).   Moreover, whilst the one child policy has reduced the influence the

number of children has had on women's WFC and strong kinship ties mean the extended family plays a more active role in childcare than in the West (Pleck et al. 1980; Kim and Ling 2001), the experiences of working women in contemporary China may vary according to status. For example, research by Cooke and Jing (2009) found that professional women in higher income groups were more likely to complain to their company about working long hours and increasingly choose to pay for housework and childcare.

As in the West, responsibility for balancing work and family life can leave women in China with few opportunities for promotion (Ng and Chakrabarty 2005). Chou et al. (2005) argue that because of the prevailing gender-based division of domestic work, women are more affected by WFC than men. Women in modern China are subject to contradictory messages. On the one hand they are expected to work full-time in a public sphere where men's contribution is overtly valued over that of women's, on the other, they are told they should prioritise family over career (Zou and Bain 2001; Aaltio and Huang 2007; Xiao and Cooke 2012).

Women's work in airlines

Western studies of airlines have highlighted the important role that organizational culture, shaped by both formal and informal rules that on the surface appear neutral, often plays in shaping and sustaining gendered stereotypes and practices (Acker 1990;

Halford et al. 1997; Mills 2006).   In the West, for example, formal organizational rules in the past excluded women from training as commercial airline pilots (Mills 1998).   However, even when allowed to enter this exclusively male occupation, informal rules or stereotypes have continued to operate indirectly, to the detriment of women (Mills and Mills 2000).   This, argues Mills and Mills (2000) shows how 'doing gender' (Rakow 1989) - the norms and assumptions that make up the informal rules of everyday organizational life - are often left unquestioned, even when formal rules have been changed (Hearn and Parkin 1987).

As work settings, airlines also provide a useful context to help us understand how 'sex' – the physiological differences between men and women - can translate into social and culturally specific patterns of behaviour (Mills 2006).   Taylor and Tyler's (2000) study of Western female flight attendants illustrates this point well. Their examination of the emotional labour involved in performing this role, concluded they were skilled 'emotion managers' (Hochschild 1983; Bolton and Boyd 2003) engaged in a daily emotional 'performance' with customers.   Some authors suggest this type of emotion management represents a commodification of emotions in the workplace (Noon and Blyton 2007).   Furthermore, there is evidence that performance may create 'emotional dissonance' (Curley and Royle 2013) stress and burnout, resulting in problems with personal relationships (Noon and Blyton 2007), of relevance to our study of WFC.

Over time, in the West, societal norms have challenged gender stereotypes in airlines, and carriers such as British Airways have responded by placing a greater emphasis on maturity and experience in the service encounter. This illustrates how workplace gender relationships are socially shaped by changing historical and cultural norms. In the newly commercialised Chinese airline industry, it is therefore, interesting to note that instead of the gendered service encounter declining in value, the reverse seems to be true (Author and Author, 2011). This illustrates the importance of context (Tsui 2004), which we will explore further by reference to our data in our concluding discussion.

HR policies and WFC

Increased awareness of the negative impact of WFC on employees and their performance led to the development of HR family-friendly or women-friendly policies in many Western societies (Poelmans 2005; Poelmans and Caligiuri 2008). Employers and Western states have traditionally 'addressed' these tensions through the provision of part-time, flexible working arrangements and through welfare (Crompton and Lyonette 2011; Beham et al. 2012). Evidence suggests a supportive work-family organisational culture, and a good WLB delivers positive outcomes such as improved employee engagement, productivity and organisational image (Kinnunen et al. 2005; Premeaux et al. 2007; Carlson et al. 2009; Fikensenbaum 2014).

There is some evidence to suggest that HRM policies in modern China have been influenced by foreign practices (Warner 2004; Taylor 2011). However, the extent to which equal opportunities and WFC/WLB policies and practices have been affected, has been questioned (Warner 2011; Xiao and Cooke 2012). In China, the WLB metaphor is often employed when referring to workplace harmony and integration but, argues Russell (2008, p.6), 'there is little evidence of a 'western' framework being used'. Instead, HR initiatives in Asia that are 'family-friendly' are often regarded as "bonding opportunities" amongst employees and between employees and their families, reflecting the social and collectivist nature of workplace relationships in these countries (Chandra 2012 p.1043). Unsurprisingly, therefore, Cooke (2011b, p.2571) argues that Western HR practices in this area have failed to challenge the conservative 'benevolent paternalism' that continues to pervade Chinese workplace relations, particularly in the state sector. Research she conducted with Jing in 2009, illustrated the ways in which Chinese managers, and even workers, accept WFC as a fact of life. Where it was found organizations did address WFC concerns, significantly, this was usually a by-product of HR policies aimed at negating the effects of long working hours on 'key' employees. Such a finding thus suggests, that the gender-neutral language of WLB may have already become embedded in HR discourses in China. If this is the case, the universal problem of long working hours has taken precedence over gender specific WFC concerns, which could disproportionately negatively affect women in lower status occupations.

Methodology

There are no pre-existing studies of women's experiences of working in the Chinese airline industry, and as we have outlined in our review of the literature, WFC is an under-explored concept in this national context. Consequently, our research is fundamentally exploratory in nature, though it tests existing assumptions particularly about sources and consequences of women's WFC identified in literature. Previous research on women's WFC has been largely quantitative, providing numerical descriptions but lacking in detail (Aryee 1992; Kinnunen and Mauno 1998; Ngo and Lau 1998; Kim and Ling 2001; Premeaux et al. 2007; Ahmad and Masood 2011). We employed a mixed methodology.

First, we distributed a questionnaire to one hundred and five female employees in three airlines. Respondents were chosen alongside managers from three job categories where women dominated numerically: cabin crew, ground staff and back-office staff. The response rate for each airline was 100, 88 and 77 per cent respectively. Descriptive and correlation analytical techniques were utilised to report the questionnaire data mainly regarding the respondents' employment histories and domestic circumstances, the degree of WFC women experienced and relationships between each work or family factor and WFC, and the sources and degree of support from the work and family domain and how these influenced WFC. Background information was particularly important in a context where no prior data existed.

Face-to-face interviews were then conducted to gather detail of what, why and how things happened, thus allowing for a better understanding of the research situation. Interviews in the workplace lasted between 30-60 minutes. The interviewer asked interviewees for permission to contact them by email, which proved a useful, (if self-selecting) additional data resource. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for an exploration of issues as they emerged and establish a rapport that facilitated later email conversations. The interview data were analysed thematically in line with our research objectives.

Using three airlines as case studies provided the opportunity to compare and contrast women's experiences across the sector. Yin (1994, p. 1) suggests: 'case studies are the preferred strategy when "how" or "why" questions are being posed, or when the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context.' A common criticism of case studies however, is that they may not be representative and findings can not be generalised to a wider population' (Burton 2000, p. 224). The use of multiple case studies, as in this research can address this potential weakness.

For reasons of confidentiality the three airlines selected have been given pseudonyms - Phoenix, Panda and Dragon. They are diversified in history, ownership, size and flight routes: making comparisons between them more

meaningful and interesting. A total of sixteen female employees from Phoenix, fourteen from Panda and sixteen from Dragon Airlines were interviewed alongside nine middle/senior managers - four from Phoenix, three from Panda and two from Dragon. Phoenix is a medium-sized joint-stock organization that employs approximately 10,200 people: it is among the top five airlines in China. Panda, a small-sized state-owned airline employs about 4,800 people. Finally, Dragon is a large-sized state-owned enterprise employing around 20,400 and is the most international of the airlines.

We first present data from our questionnaire and then findings from the interviews. Questionnaire and interview schedules were formulated and gained ethical institutional approval. It was also necessary to gain the approval of airline managers before questionnaires were distributed. Therefore, the use of semi-structured interviews was particularly important because it allowed for a more unfettered exploration of the experiences of participants. For this reason we allocate more space to our qualitative findings.

Questionnaire findings

Table 1 shows an overall tendency for respondents to agree that they experienced some degree of WFC. This was highest in Panda airlines, then Phoenix and finally, Dragon. Married women reported greater conflict than their unmarried counterparts.

Unsurprisingly, employees who worked evenings and shifts experienced the highest levels of conflict. Among the different occupational groups, cabin crew experienced the highest levels of WFC.

Insert Table 1

Table 2 illustrates sources of support respondents received. In all cases parents, parents-in-law and spouses were considered most supportive, followed by friends and other family members. Management support was less significant. Respondents thus reported receiving considerably more support from their *home* than from *work* domains.

Insert Table 2

Table 3 shows a summary of correlations among the variables in the three cases. In the work domain, Phoenix shows significant correlations between all job-related factors (job type, work schedule inflexibility, work pressure, length of leave, and negative organizational views of women) and WFC, with all correlations having a p-value of less than 0.05. In Panda, most factors are strongly correlated to WFC, except length of leave. In Dragon, most factors have a strong relationship with WFC, but work pressure does not. We speculate that one explanation for this was that Dragon had recently merged with a national carrier and job security had increased.

In all three airlines, it is again important to note that the dominant factors leading to WFC came from the work context, not the family. By contrast, family related factors (age of children, eldercare and housework) were not statistically significant in any of the airlines, with all the correlations having a p-value of more than 0.05, differing from Western samples, where family is regarded as significant (Alvesson and Billing 1997; Poelmans 2005; Premeaux et al. 2007).

Insert Table 3

Interviews with Women in three Chinese Airlines

Sources and consequences of WFC

Interviewees identified major sources of WFC as: shift work (incorporating schedule inflexibility); heavy workloads; inflexible or inadequate leave systems; negative attitudes of family members towards their job. Of those work related factors identified, shift work and irregular / inflexible schedules could be attributed to airline work, however, being unable to take leave at all, cited frequently as a major cause of WFC, is more specific to airlines in China. In Phoenix for example, employees were told they must take fifteen days 'compulsory' leave a year for health and safety reasons however, questionnaire responses showed less than 20 per cent did so. Interviews uncovered reasons for this including, an inability to secure permission to

take leave from managers, intensification of workloads due to the rapid expansion of airlines and, a real fear that they would be replaced in their absence. In Dragon, work intensification, due to a freeze on recruitment, meant women often found it impossible to find an appropriate time to take leave. Job insecurity and the use of short-term contracts (discussed below) also deterred requests.

Women reported that airlines gave little consideration to women's family responsibilities. Interviewees were reluctant to request leave to deal with problems at home, because this was frowned upon by managers and punished through the allocation of lower performance marks and deduction of pay:

> …It is very difficult to ask for leave. In case my family has any emergencies, I
>
> can hardly put my work aside and go back to deal with it. If I take a day's
>
> leave, my leader would be unhappy and my bonus would be deducted.
>
> (Ground staff, Dragon Airlines)

Senior flight attendants found supervisory responsibilities generated further WFC. The expectation was, as this interviewee explains, that supervisors were contactable at all times:

> I manage about 100 flight attendants in my team. My mobile phone must be
>
> switched on at all times. If there is any emergency, I must cope with it right
>
> away no matter where I am and when it is…. I feel frustrated and even lose

my temper at home, which influences my family life (Chief attendant,

Phoenix).

In terms of negative attitudes of family members towards their job (a factor identified as contributing to WFC), women reported a variety of problems. The nature of the service encounter in airline work is particularly gendered and organizational culture and practices encourage, if not demand, women utilize feminine skills to perform their role, sometimes leading to conflict at home with partners and family.

Interestingly, the Head of Cabin Crew in Phoenix attributed women's experience of WFC to the emotional demands of the job and the company's system of management, specifically the way individual performance is evaluated:

Both cabin service and ground service are actually emotional labour. They are front-line

staff… must be devoted, patient, responsive, friendly and smiling all the time…Our

company always adheres to the rule that customers are up-most and emphasises that

each member of our staff must deliver high quality services. Comments from customers

are directly linked with their performance assessment…

The Head of Ground Handling in Dragon similarly, identified characteristics of work, particularly shift work and emotional labour, as causes of WFC for women, alongside

increased work intensification:

One shift involves 24-hour on duty. The first shift starts from 6:10 am, but the earliest

one can start from 4:00 am. When they are off duty, they have to await orders at any

time. Secondly, ground staff are front-line staff as well, so they must deliver good

customer service. However, they often encounter complaints or even curses from

passengers in case flights are delayed. Actually, they are innocent because the delay of

flights is often due to unexpected bad weather or air traffic control. This job brings staff

members high intensification.

Interviewees also identified the three main consequences of WFC as: negative

psychology; reduced life quality; and lowered career ambitions. Working mothers

reported feeling guilty because of limited time spent with children or spouses.

Reduced family time resulted in worries or complaints from their family members

(i.e. husbands were not satisfied with women's insufficient responsibility for domestic

work). Moreover, to meet family needs, many women either switched to non-shift

work and/or lowered their aspirations:

I have to lower my career expectation. I gave up an excellent chance of job

promotion because that job involved relocation…. The consequence is that I

found myself depressed a lot and often cry….. It took me 2 years to go

through these difficulties and switch from one role to another. (ground staff,

Phoenix)

WFC, nonetheless, was not the only factor affecting women's careers. As shown in the following sections, other factors were also found to limit women's progression in this study.

Feminized jobs and women's career development

At the time of our research cabin crew were exclusively female in all airlines, which did provide women with opportunities for promotion to supervisory level.   The emphasis on youth and appearance as key qualifications for the job however, meant careers were time limited.   In other roles, not exclusively, but predominantly female, women also talked of limited opportunities.   Female ground crew in Phoenix and back office staff in Dragon felt few training schemes and long-term career development plans were available.   A manager in the HR Department in Phoenix acknowledged that there were fewer women at senior management levels and in non-front line roles, but saw this as 'inevitable' because of 'the male character' of these jobs.   One factor, cited by more than half of interviewees' in Phoenix as influencing career aspirations, was the male-dominated organizational culture**.** Women talked of a bias that favoured first men and then single women, in terms of recruitment and promotion and the availability of only short-term training opportunities.   The absence of long-term career development for women dominated in interviews.   Both heads of Cabin Crew and Ground Handling Service

Departments in Dragon, confirmed this absence and reported that female cabin crew expected their jobs to end in their 30s. Some women might be redeployed to ground staff or back-office jobs, but for others their career ended. We did find some junior female management in other departments, but middle and top management were male-dominated.

Women in Panda airlines were most concerned about lack of opportunities to develop qualifications and skills. One reason was that Panda, unlike larger airlines, recruited more women with college diplomas than degrees (a symbol of education in China). In Panda, flight attendants in particular, worried about their long term employment opportunities. We explored issues relating to the selection and recruitment of cabin crew further, during interviews with HR managers in Panda. One manager appeared to imply that women's appearance was most important and was explicitly aligned with the organisation's business strategy:

> Chinese passengers, especially male, often judge the quality of air services based on the quality of flight attendants, meaning that whether or not they are pretty! So we pay more attention to girls' appearance and figure. Their education background and foreign language skills are not the most important as long as they hold high school diplomas or diplomas with the cabin attendant speciality and they can speak good mandarin (not Sichuan dialect). It will also be a bonus if they are specialised in singing and dancing!

Inflexible or non-existent leave systems limited women further. Women were afraid to ask for leave to undertake qualifications or training. Since deregulation there had been a significant increase in the number of staff being employed on temporary insecure contracts. The negative consequences for training opportunities and career progression were described by one female contract worker in Dragon airlines:

> …an individual's promotion depends on his/her seniority, which is an
>
> unwritten rule. In other words, it relies with the time length he/she has served
>
> in the company… (Ground staff).

In both Dragon and Panda, female contract and agency workers outnumbered female permanent employees in the Ground Handling Service Department. The Head of department in Dragon explained that since the mid 1990's three types of employment contract had been introduced. Women accounted for 45 per cent employed on permanent contracts, 61 per cent of flexible contract workers and 91 per cent of short term agency workers. The only category of female staff that airlines recruited directly were cabin crew. Flight attendants in Dragon while 'enjoying' short-term job security, nonetheless, were usually employed on two year fixed-term renewable contracts.

Panda Airlines adopted two methods of recruitment: self-recruitment and

outsourcing services. Some employees were recruited formally based on fixed-term labour contracts (flight attendants were in this category), while others were hired through outsourcing. Most of the ground staff were employed from a labour agency that works in partnership with the company.

Type of employment contract significantly affected career aspirations, progression and conditions of employment. In Dragon, for example, permanent 'senior staff' who had usually been employed for more than 10 years enjoyed better wages, job security and welfare benefits, while fixed-term staff generally employed on two or three years contracts were marginalised. One interviewee commented that this situation was unfair because, she argued, 'we have contributed equally or even more to the company'. Another said:

My job position is similar to senior workers in the ground service section, but my salary is only half of theirs although I have done more than them. What they earn is always higher than me even if they ask for sick leave. Their welfare is also better than contract workers. I'm de-motivated by this unfair practice.

Most women suggested that improvements in pay and welfare were needed and that the pay system needed to be reformed and based on job posts and duties, instead of seniority and contract type. There was a strong sense of organizational injustice.

HR policies and practices

Managers from all three airlines acknowledged that some women experienced WFC. They were however, keen to draw attention to HR initiatives aimed at benefiting women's mental and physical health. To demonstrate that female workers were treated well, reference was made by a manager in Panda to maternity leave policies:

> Our flight attendants are permitted to stop stewarding on board since the first day of their pregnancy. They can either stay home or handle office work. They are still given basic salaries.

Pregnant women were also the focus of managers in Dragon, when asked about the airline's HR equality and diversity practices. Heads of Cabin Crew and Ground Handling departments acknowledged that WFC might be a problem for working mothers. Guided by the HR department, the Ground Handling Department rearranged work for pregnant women and provided free health check-ups and psychological seminars. Similarly as the Head of Cabin Crew noted:

> When flight attendants are pregnant, they can choose to do office work or be off duty. They'll be given post wages if they work at the office and they'll be provided basic salaries if they are not on duty. They can get full pay when they have been pregnant for 8 months.

In Phoenix, the Head of Cabin Crew was confident that the company had launched preferential policies for women with children, however, it should be noted that the quote below contradicts what we learnt from women we interviewed:

> If a female flight attendant has a child who is no more than two years old, she does not need to stay over out of the city.   Flight attendants are not allowed to steward on board consecutively for six days. If they steward on planes overtime, they will be compensated. Recently, aiming to lead all of the employees to a healthy brand-new life, we've worked out a new concept – compulsory leave. The company does not encourage staff to work overtime.

The Vice General Manager of HR moreover, confirmed the policy of compulsory leave, which aimed to discourage employees from working overtime, and reflected the company's concern for female health and safety.

Significantly, when middle and senior managers were interviewed in the three airlines, they failed to identify any of the *work*-related problems cited by women as obstacles to their career advancement.   Instead, managers presented a positive image of an industry that provided effective support for female employees.   This contrasted sharply with the pessimistic perceptions of interviewees.   A few women described HR and EO policies as 'acceptable' or 'employee-oriented', however, positive comments highlight medical or childcare arrangements, not career development. The

majority expressed discontent with the content of HR policies, which varied across job type and organization.   Flight attendants in Phoenix and Dragon complained that organizational E&D policies were largely paternalistic.   Cabin crew in Panda were most critical, citing the rigidity of work arrangements (shift swaps were forbidden) the leave system (linked to performance ratings) and allocating stay-over duties to those who have children, as most problematic in respect of WFC.   Panda was the smallest of the airlines and one senior manager thought it had found it difficult to adapt to a changing environment:

…we have been experiencing hardships…... Through structural and managerial changes, and a complement of new shares, we have managed to hold a firm foot in the airline market. However, it's far from satisfactory. I think the key is to improve quality and business morale of our employees, especially front-line workers.

He also recognised that all employees, but particularly working mothers, were under increasing pressure:

We cannot follow a generous management approach like we did before… Our employees have got sense of crisis and competitiveness because of this stricter appraisal system. I understand they are more stressful on account of higher level of job demands. Especially those working mothers have to achieve a balance between their work

commitment and family responsibilities.

Questioned about why women were under-represented at middle/senior management level, several managers attributed this to the 'nature and attributes of management work'. The implication being that men, by virtue of their gender, are better suited to managerial roles, thus reinforcing views held by women that men are naturally preferred over them. The under-representation of women in roles above supervisory level appeared particularly inequitable in the ground service and back office sections, because here women accounted for a larger percentage of the total workforce. Factors such as age, 'beauty' and marital status were cited by HR managers as more important in recruitment and promotion of women, than their qualifications and experience.

Women's Careers and WFC

Most women interviewed held traditional views about their family role and feared that a well-developed career would negatively impact on it. From this perspective WFC seemed inevitable, however, during interviews we probed deeper and found that fatalistic attitudes about the airline industry's gendered organizational culture was the primary source of women's pessimism about the incompatibility of a career and family life.

Interviews with HR managers suggested women's pessimism was justified. One

reported that the organization discouraged young female recruits from marrying in the first three years of employment, because the airline believed marriage undermined work commitment. When asked why no women were represented in senior management, several cited the lack of qualified women in engineering, piloting and information technology: however, training opportunities were not available to address this under-representation. A significant proportion of women believed men were simply viewed as superior to women by managers: reflecting a continued attachment to a traditional Confucian gender ideology.

Ambitious women who sought career development felt this caused WFC because of enduring traditional views about women in Chinese society, as the interviewee below illustrates:

> It was the increasing work competition and pressure that stimulated me to spend more time on working and learning. But my parents often complain if I work overtime because they don't think it's a good idea for a girl to work so hard because it influences my health and appearance. (HR, Dragon)

However, we also found that the resilience of the traditional extended family in China helped facilitate work-life balance for many airline women:

> My parents moved to co-reside with us and undertook responsibilities of

childcare and housework voluntarily after I was back to my work from

childbirth. Thus, I could continue to take non-standard and tight work

schedules until three years ago when I was promoted. (Chief Trainer, Dragon)

Significantly, a majority of interviewees attributed lower WFC to strong family support. Nearly all of the married women with children reported their parents / parents-in-law or relatives looked after their children and did housework: while husbands undertook no domestic responsibilities. Single women also reported few housework responsibilities because parents either helped, or resided with them. Thus, the extended family, rather than the gendered domestic division of labour played a significant role, though we recognize it is still women who undertake the majority of domestic and caring responsibilities.

Few interviewees cited workplace support or policies as significant in addressing WFC, a finding that reinforced questionnaire results. Interviews also revealed that the employment of cheap domestic help was more widespread than anticipated and, increasingly, dual income households could afford this, allowing parents and working women to concentrate on childcare. Many women reported altering their job roles and lowering their career aspirations to try to address WFC and some even contemplated leaving paid employment altogether. The presence of grand-parental support for childcare and housework had a positive effect on career ambitions on only a small proportion of the women interviewed because organizational culture was

viewed as the main obstacle to advancement. Most had limited their future ambitions, or viewed marriage as a 'refuge' from the competitive Chinese labour market of recent years.

The Chinese airline industry presents itself as a modern sector, however, most women believed traditional and culturally specific factors continued to have a strong influence on their career opportunities. 'G*uan xi'* (personal connections) and the conservative values it embodies, was reported as significant. Good '*guan xi*' can make promotion easier for those not academically qualified or experienced, and in Panda airlines, in particular, women found an absence of *guan xi* negatively affected their career prospects. Women complained that *guan xi* advantaged men over women, particularly in gaining access to managerial airline careers through personal or family networks. In this respect *guan xi* should be viewed as a gendered organizational and cultural practice.

Analysis of data

Our questionnaire found *work* rather than *family* factors to be more significant in generating WFC for women in Chinese airlines. Thus, in contrast to the West, family related factors provided important sources of support. The questionnaire uncovered negative correlations between WFC and job type, inflexibility, shift work, work pressures, leave, and gendered organizational culture. Women reported

sources of support at home and outside work to be significant in mitigating WFC, but support from the work domain was largely absent. In all three airlines the dominant factors contributing to WFC came from the work, rather than the family context.

Interviews explored questionnaire returns in greater depth. We found the impact of liberalization and commercialization on employment in airlines to be significant. The increased use of temporary, short term and agency contracts had specifically affected women, who also experienced further job insecurity as a consequence of the aesthetic and emotional requirements of their job roles, which were age and appearance, rather than qualification related. Rapid expansion in the airline sector had led to a significant intensification of workloads, creating a highly pressurised work environment where women found few, or no opportunities, to take contractual leave or pursue career development. Ability to take leave and the emotional labour or the 'performance' required in service jobs predominantly performed by women led to stress, burnout and WFC. Women reported how organizational norms or 'rules', (Mills 2006) penalised them through formal financial penalties for taking leave to address family problems, because informal organizational 'rules' refused to acknowledge that women performed major roles outside the workplace. Contractual entitlements to leave, important particularly to women experiencing WFC, alongside organizational policies of compulsory leave (as in Pheonix) we found were ineffective from both a rights based and policy perspective, because women as organizational actors were powerless to demand these were enforced. A shortage of available

labour could not explain the organizational inflexibility experienced by women. Airline work is highly sought after in China and entry qualifications low, thus we suggest staff shortages and work intensification are a consequence of commercialization and competition.

The majority of women in our study expressed a desire to develop skills and long term career opportunities. Training opportunities were however, largely absent and women's organizational value was often measured by reference to short-term criteria such as youth and 'beauty'. Tenure of employment is significant in determining whether organizations decide to invest in training, and most women were employed on insecure contracts. Evidence from interviews across all job roles and the presence of horizontal and vertical gendered occupational segregation moreover, suggests the influence of a strong gendered organizational culture. Our findings suggest that managers accepted the gendered status quo that disadvantaged women, and importantly, had no incentive to change it. Organizations were described by women as "favouring men" or "single women" over married women, reflecting dominant gendered value systems in wider Chinese society. Interviews with HR managers confirm Cooke's (2011b) perception that gendered organizational policies and practices in China remain unquestioned and largely paternalistic, despite the diminished influence of the state. A focus by managers on women's biological well-being (as opposed to their social situation) and an almost total neglect of their career development were thus, important signifiers.

Findings in relation to *family* to work conflict show women in our case studies experienced considerably less conflict of this type than reported in Western studies. Childcare, eldercare and housework, singularly or collectively, were not found to be significant contributors. The role of the extended family and relative youth of women employed in the airline sector, all provide possible explanations. The availability of cheap domestic labour was also significant. Many women had access to paid help and free childcare provided by family members. Given that working women found support outside the workplace that mitigated *family* to work conflict, it is therefore interesting to note that managers continued to cite marriage and motherhood as obstacles to women's career advancement.

Conclusion

Our study contributes to an understanding of what remains a relatively under-developed literature on WFC in the East and in China. The setting in which HR policies and practices are evaluated is important, for as Shen et al. (2009, p.247) argue, there are "different diversity issues in different national contexts". Furthermore, in agreement with Lewis et al (2007, p.365), we believe that exporting the gender-neutral concept of WLB from the West is inappropriate, because it is essential that we "question assumptions about the gendered nature of work or the

constraints to individual choices", by reference to national and cultural contexts. Our examination of women's WFC reflects the continued influence of traditional patriarchal Confucian values and ideas on gendered processes in the family and workplace in China. Research also suggests (Zou 2007) that economic change, whilst radically affecting the employment relationship of all, has had a disproportionately negative impact on women. The Chinese airline industry has evolved from state military control to occupy a buoyant position in the commercial sector and, therefore, usefully highlights the interrelationship between commercialization and gendered processes in employment. Our research illustrates how, in an effort to gain competitive advantage, Chinese airlines have adopted some of the most retrogressive gendered employment practices from their Western counterparts. Conceptualized in the West (c.f. Noon and Blyton 2007; Taylor and Tyler 2000) as the commodification and exploitation of women's aesthetic and emotional labour, the adoption of these practices also appears to rest on the unquestioned assumption that the affluent consumer in the new Chinese market economy, is male. The importance of status and how it intersects with gender also emerged in our research. Previous studies have concentrated on female managers and professionals (c.f. Cooke and Jou 2009) and found 'key' employees able to exert some power and choice over HR policies and practices. By contrast, the status of the women in our research, painfully demonstrates their lack of power in terms of choice and their limited influence on organizational decision-making.

Returning to our three original objectives. Our research locates the main sources of WFC for women in the Chinese airline industry as residing in the work context, but shows how societal and cultural values continue to exert influence in both spheres. Findings confirm the importance of family in the East (c.f. Hassan 2010), but in addition, we suggest that strong traditional family networks in China may be 'loosening' due to the wide availability of affordable domestic help. Our second objective, to examine the extent to which the gendering of jobs in airlines is interrelated with commercialization and WFC, proved significant and we elaborate further below. Liberalization and commercialization has affected the gendered character of jobs, demanding sexualized and emotional labour, which we found to be a source of both family-to-work conflict between women, their partners and families, and work-to-family conflict as a consequence of stress, burnout, job insecurity and decreased longevity of employment. Our third objective - to investigate the efficacy of HR policies and practices in airlines was, in part, addressed methodologically by ensuring women were given 'voice' through exploratory interviews. Women's views provided alternative or oppositional narratives of organizational life, which can often remain hidden in employment contexts and work cultures that are deferential, provide insecure employment, or are dominated by embedded gendered discourses. Shen et al (2009, p.247) acknowledge that "different groups within an organization may have different perceptions of diversity management" and that it is necessary to appreciate this if HRM policies are to be effective. Our findings support this approach: the dominant organizational discourse in airlines was that of male senior managers, who

made gendered assumptions about female employees, totally at odds with their views and actual experiences. Thus, while HR managers recognized women experienced WFC, they either did not appreciate its impact, or did not see it as the responsibility of the organization to address it. This failure to recognize the dual work and family roles that many women occupy, was accompanied moreover, by a total neglect of women's career development in the work domain.

We speculate that the mismatch that we found between the experiences of women and managers' perceptions of their needs, reflects a wider problem when looking at WFC/WLB and HR policies and practices in the Chinese context. Tensions have emerged in China between individualism, central to the new market model, employment contracts and concepts such as WLB, and traditional collectivist Chinese values. The state, the main vehicle for disseminating collective values has, furthermore, withdrawn from the day-to-day management of organizations like airlines, exposing these tensions at the level of the workplace. Political and economic factors may be significant drivers of macro-organizational change, but at the level of the workplace and employment relationship their negative effects need to be addressed. Western feminists have long observed that when unfettered markets are left to distribute rewards - job segregation, salary inequalities and glass-ceilings - often result (Freeman and Philips 1988; Morrison et al. 1992; Halford and Leonard 2001). Collective regulation, in the form of equalities legislation has emerged in China, but what our research suggests is that when individuals or groups of employees

lack power and status, contractual and legal rights are ineffective. Furthermore, regulation neither completely removes barriers for women, nor directly challenges patriarchal ideologies (Cockburn 1991; Calas and Smircich 2006), which are deeply embedded in Chinese society.

It is important not to privilege discourses over material conditions and causes of discursive production, including economic, political and legislative change. However, our findings suggest that a revolution in workplace attitudes needs to take place, capable of also challenging established cultural and social processes. In terms of what airline managers might gain from this study, we suggest that ignoring women's WFC and career development needs may, in the short term, deliver competitive advantage, but in the long term could ultimately affect organizational performance. However, we are also acutely aware that the women who participated in our research have a precarious occupational status, that there is an excess of labour available to replace them, and that jobs in the airline industry are attractive. The power of these women as change agents therefore, appears to be limited.

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