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New Work in China – Work From Home, 996 and Employee Motivation

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Abstract

Work is the primary source of income for most people. The work system has experienced changes over the years, and the latest trend seems to be New Work, which the pandemic has also fuelled during the last months. Often mentioned in combination with the term New Work are the terms "Work from home" or "home office" and other flexible work systems. In this course paper, I will discuss the Chinese work system and compare it with the rest of the world. At the same time, I will investigate the Chinese labour market and the working conditions in the People's Republic of China.

Additionally, this paper will also discuss the labour code governing the New Work system in China. I will also seek to find out how motivation leads to job satisfaction using the motivation theories. As the Chinese workforce is influenced by unique behaviours routed in Chinese national culture, which form the work culture, this course paper will also discuss the development and trends in the work system in China.

Keywords: Work, 996, Hrm, China, Labour, Remote

Introduction

Work is the primary source of income for most people, and whilst changes of traditional work systems often seem to be of slow pace in the western world, terms such as "China speed" indicate that changes, in general, seem to take place at a faster pace in China. The latest trend seems to be New Work, which the Covid-19 pandemic has also additionally fuelled during the last months. Often mentioned in combination with the term New Work are the terms "Work from home" or "home office" and other flexible work systems. Whilst there has been a lot of research in the fields of HRM with a focus on western societies and newer approaches to work systems, only a few authors, such as Cooke (Cooke, 2021) take a closer look at recent developments in China from an HRM perspective.

Therefore, this paper aims to investigate

- the current work system in China and how it is influenced by the general developments of the Chinese labour market and the working conditions in China.
- the recent changes on labour code governing the New Work system in China.
- how recent developments of the work system and its governing labour code interplays with job satisfaction and how motivation, in general, is influenced by traditional Chinese national culture.

First, the term New Work will be explained and discussed in its current form and in the following paragraphs, the paper will look at China and how New Work is perceived in China. Second, general working conditions, demographic developments, and the governing labour code will be discussed to better understand the Chinese labour force and its surrounding factors in general. Third, the paper will look at how recent developments influence employee motivation and how national culture influences motivational aspects in China. This paper may be considered a snapshot of the current state of the topics mentioned above. It could act as an enabler for further research at the crossroads of the topics new work, national culture and motivation in China.

Definition and History of New Work

The New Work concept was a term Prof. Dr. Frithjof Bergmann, a social philosopher, started in the late 1970ies early 1980ies when Bergmann also founded the "Centre for New Work" in Flint, Michigan (Workpath, 2020). The new work structure encourages self-growth since it is future-centric and involves meeting the demands of an individual. The philosopher associated the term with human freedom and an end to the preceding work system. Since the Industrial Revolution, the previous work system was inflexible and had clear job hierarchies. The work structure has experienced changes, and each decade has its unique features. In the 1950s, the office layout was inspired by the factory setup with workers in a tight space, while the executive offices had large windows for strict supervision (Atlassian, 2020). The employees were under strict supervision with fixed working hours. In the next decade, there were changes in innovation and technology where they acquired electric typewriters that were more efficient. In the 1970s, there was a rise in privately-owned companies, and computers began during this period (Atlassian, 2020). The work system in these eras had strict dress codes for the employees and the working hours were rigid.

Technology and innovation have marked the changes in the work system over the decades. In the 1980s, people demanded a work-life balance, and the office culture incorporated 9-to-5 working hours and wellness programs (Atlassian, 2020). In this era, computers were common, and it was part of the corporate culture. Employees started demanding better working environments and the dot com businesses started experiencing growth in the 1990 era (Atlassian, 2020). The employees realised that company loyalty had affected their quality of life and wanted the employers to implement accommodative policies. The office dress code was one of the factors that were adjusted. In the 2000 era, the cubicle offices were replaced by the open plan, and there was the use of technology like Skype, Google, Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in the offices (Atlassian, 2020). This was also an era marked by joblessness. A diverse workforce marked the 2010 era, and the technologies included artificial intelligence and cloud that enabled mass storage of data (Atlassian, 2020). This era slowly did away with lots of office paperwork and digitalised the working system. The 2020 work era can be defined as open, with workers more focused on their team rather than the place of work (Atlassian, 2020). This era marks the New Work structure, which is digitalised and offers flexibility to the workers.

Therefore, New Work is mainly used to describe fundamental changes to the structure of the current or better traditional work system and utilise modern forms of communication and flexible arrangements for space and time where and when to work. The new work structure is relatable to freedom, hence outdating the previous system. "It is a collective term for meaningful and forward-looking work, a concept for a new way of working in the global and digital age" (Workpath, 2020). The new work system has redefined the expectations from the

employer to the employee and the workplace image. It is a flexible system that encourages self-discipline and self-determination since it is free of rigid supervision as in the previous work structure. The new work system involves open-plan offices and offers mobility to the employees, referred to as 'work from home. The digital transformation of the work system triggers a new culture and a new way of life (Workpath, 2020). These changes have affected all industries, including manufacturing (Workpath, 2020). The manufacturing industries are now more customer-specific and produce products as per their needs, which is especially visible in China, where even brands such as LVMH offer personalisation options during the order process (Daxueconsulting, 2021).

Is China so Different?
"New Work" has become a global trend or at least some of its technological parts. Primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries, China included, have adopted the working from the home system to keep their employees safe (Yu & Wang, 2021). The home-office system has proved effective so far, and it seems it will be adopted even after the pandemic. "Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, work from home was not commonly practised in the People's Republic of China, explains Sophy Wang, an associate with CMS China" (Yu & Wang, 2021, p.1). However, the pandemic has forced the country to adopt the system to adhere to the restrictions put in place. The restrictions involve lockdowns and social distancing, which would not be possible in some workplaces.

However, after the pandemic, there are expected changes in the work system. China's workforce has started returning to the office after the country reported some recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic though still under strict protocols (McLaurin, 2021). Thus, the Chinese workplace can be described as open as the workforce slowly returns to their places of work. The rest of the world is still dealing with the effects of the pandemic and is at various stages of recovery; China has opened up its cities and businesses by mid to late 2020 (McLaurin, 2021). In an attempt to understand the current Chinese workplace, a survey was conducted, and the results were analysed. "For our latest China Workplace Survey (WPS), Gensler surveyed 3,000+ professional workers in China to understand how, and where, they were now working" (McLaurin, 2021, p.1). The survey intended to understand the workplace environment after the workers had just transitioned from working from home. The results are supposed to give an insight into other nations, especially those that have not opened their workplace. By January 2021, many Chinese workers had returned to work from their offices, 99% of the workforce compared to the US, where half of their workforce is still working from home (McLaurin, 2021). Hence, to the Chinese nationals, the workforce has adopted the return to work from office practice, while most countries still prefer the working from the home trend.

China's Labour Market
China's labour market has been rapidly changing and facing severe challenges since the mid 2010ies, influenced by China's demographic. The birth rate continues to decrease from 13,57% in 2016 to 8,52% in 2020 and reflects a change in natural growth rate from 6,53% in 2116 down to 1,45% in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021a). The workforce in China is coming of age. From 2010 to 2020, the percentage of the population aged 65 and above rose from 8% to 12% (Worldbank, 2019a).
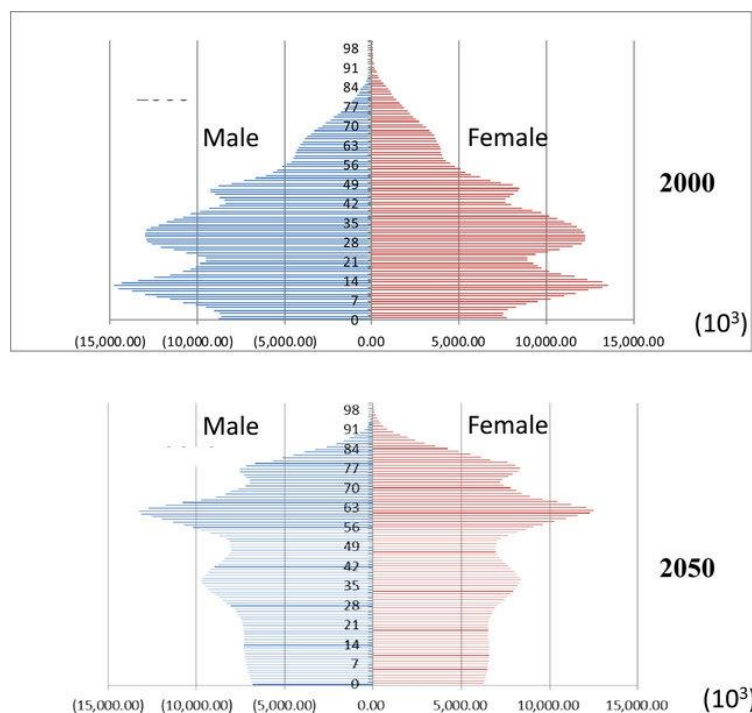
Figure 1: Population pyramid for China in 2000 and 2050 (Crampton, 2013)

Regarding gender diversity in the workforce, China has traditionally a relatively evenly distributed workforce, also supported by government efforts in the past. Mao Zedong himself coined the phrase: "Chinese women hold up half of the sky". Whilst there seems to be a trend that these earlier achievements seem to be diluted due to the unregulated private sector (Wang, 2020), women made up 43.7% of the total labour force in 2019 (Worldbank, 2019b). Whilst the Covid 19 pandemic initially hit China hard, especially in the lower educated part of the workforce, whereas up to 47,51% at least mentioned a loss of income (Qian 2020), the overall economic rebound quickly, and residents in China had a per capita disposable income of 35,128 yuan in 2021, a nominal gain of 9.1 per cent over the previous year and an actual increase of 8.1 per cent after pricing effects were deducted; the growth rate was 14.3 per cent higher than in 2019. The average growth rate has been 6.9% in the last two years. After adjusting for price considerations, the two-year average actual growth rate was 5.1 per cent (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021b).

Employees in China's IT sector earned an average of 177,500 yuan per year, while those in the agriculture sector earned an average of 48,500 yuan per year. The national average in 2020 was 97,400 yuan (Statista, 2021).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the workforce adopted the working from home practice. However, with China opening up its offices, the workforce is returning to their offices. Initially, the people operated through a hybrid mode where they divided their work time to work from home and the office when the COVID-19 pandemic severely hit China (Wang et al., 2021). The hybrid mode was a new system, and workers adopted it differently and made decisions on balancing their work hours. The recovery process from the COVID-19 pandemic varies between countries resulting in differences in the return to offices progress. "In China, the pandemic recovery process started in spring of 2020, when companies went through a process of reopening their offices, and employees transitioned from mandated work-from-home to a hybrid mode of working from home and in the office" (Wang et al., 2021). The employees had the freedom to choose whether to work from home or return to the offices.

The hybrid mode involved the employees deciding where to work, which was influenced by various factors. The hybrid mode reported higher productivity than working from home fully (Wang et al., 2021). The workers work more effectively when given the freedom to choose a suitable work environment, either at home or office.

Remote work is a flexible work arrangement for the employee as they are not confined to a specific work, also known as working from home. This is a practice that has been in existence for some time, and some companies have embraced it. However, in reality, the practice has not been beneficial, especially to the employer, as seen when Yahoo banned its employees from working from home (Wang et al., 2021). The long-term effect of remote working is inconclusive since it is still a relatively new practice. Remote working offers the employee a healthy work-life balance due to its flexible working hours. However, remote work has both positive and negative effects on productivity. It can yield high productivity because it offers the workers job satisfaction due to its freedom. At the same time, it can lead to low productivity because the workers may not have access to high-quality software development as in the offices. Also, remote work blurs the worker's boundary between work and personal life. Remote work also leads to self-isolation since one cannot physically interact with their co-workers. Additionally, some jobs require team effort and collaboration, which is hard to achieve through remote work.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country, China shifted to remote work. In the previous years, the Chinese worked from offices. "However, like in many other labour markets in the world, the unique pressure of the COVID-19 crisis compelled Chinese business to embrace and utilise work from home as a way to protect workers while maintaining business operations" (Yu & Wang, 2021, p.1). Remote work can also benefit the employer since it reduces operational costs like office rent. Thus, the Chinese labour market has experienced a change from working from the office to remote working and now to the hybrid mode. The hybrid mode is the latest trend in the Chinese workforce, where the employee chooses where to work.

Working Conditions in China

The working conditions in the Chinese workforce have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The workers had ceased going to their offices and were working from home. However, after strict lockdowns, the country has relatively soon opened up again, and the new hybrid mode was adopted. According to the survey on one of the multinational technology software companies with several branches in China, they have operated in the hybrid mode for more than three months now (Wang et al., 2021). The workers can make independent decisions on where to work without influence, even from their manager. The survey revealed that the workers' overall productivity remained unchanged and even improved in some instances compared with the one before the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang et al., 2021). The new working conditions involved the use of online platforms as a means of communication between the employees. Thus, the employee's social interaction was affected due to a lack of face-to-face interactions.

Moreover, China's employment situation can be discussed by comparing the pre and post COVID-19 periods. "China's unemployment rate has steadily dropped from last year's pandemic peak through a lack of jobs for graduates, and a shortage of skilled manufacturing workers point to underlying problems in the labour market" (Bloomberg, 2021). The drop can be attributed to the return to offices trend that has been adopted recently by the Chinese workforce. However, the service industries, which are best suited for graduates, are

recovering slower than the manufacturing industries causing an unbalanced economic growth. The trend has been experienced because both the unemployed graduates and the companies are experiencing difficulties. The graduates are struggling to find jobs, and the companies do not have enough funds to recruit new personnel. The Chinese government has vowed to expand the employment channels by offering the necessary help to low-income earners and the marginalised and supporting entrepreneurs (Huaxia, 2021). Through this strategy, the government will reduce the unemployment rate.

The work conditions can also be described concerning the experiences of the workers. According to the employees, they longed to go back to work to reconnect with their colleagues as the main reason (McLaurin, 2021). The people seem to have missed each other's company and the need to belong to a group. McLaurin (2021) argues that "Very few Chinese companies made physical changes to the office beyond enhanced cleaning and policy changes before returning" (p.2). Therefore, the work environment is not as conducive as before since many added activities take place like virtual collaboration. The office space supports the previous working system but is not conducive to the new work system. The senior leadership at the places of work are used to expecting their staff in the office.

However, the new work system does not require all employees to be always in the office. There is a need for balance between the leaders' expectations and the staff's expectations for the new work system. In addition, there are worries about remote work that have not been fully addressed. These are issues like career advancement, and it has been a concern for the senior management. There is a notable difference in the choice of the work system preferable between the staff and the senior leadership in firms. A study points out that "This mobility is also driven by high levels of choice among the Chinese workforce-four out of five workers report a choice in where they work during a typical week (though number drops to 63% for non-managers and more junior workers)" (McLaurin, 2021 p.3). Thus, the organisations should remodel their office structures to accommodate the new work system and offer spaces that will entice workers to return to their offices.

China's Labour Code and Recent Changes - New Work & Work from Home
The Chinese labour codes apply to all workforce within its borders. Thus, the labour code will apply to all employees, even those working from home, as they should enjoy similar benefits as those in the offices (Yu & Wang, 2021). There exist no specific laws targeting the working from the home workforce. "According to CMS expert Yu, in response to the pandemic, a Chinese employer can initiate a work-from-home arrangement with an employee (i.e., to arrange for employees to work by phone or by the internet and through other electronic means at home) if the company deems it in the best interests of employee health and business operations" (Yu & Wang, 2021 p.3). The decision on the preferred work system is dependent on the organisation and its employees. The organisation should evaluate which system works best in productivity and advise its employees to adopt it. Both parties, the employer and the employee, must agree as they decide on either a new work system or work from home. The COVID-19 pandemic had previously dictated the terms of the work system due to the regulations in place. However, now that the restrictions have been eased, people can return to work from the offices. The future of the work system is reliant on the employer and the employees.

The new work system, whose innovations include remote work and hybrid mode, has not been effective for a long time. Thus, there are no legislations specific to the system, but the general labour law still covers those in the hybrid mode and the remote work (CMS, 2020).

The companies can adopt the working from the home system through agreements or contracts with the employees. Having an understanding between the two parties will ensure that the new work system is adequate for the organisation. It should also be noted that an employer cannot force an employee to work from home without their consent, and employees cannot make demands to work remotely (CMS, 2020). Working from home should be a mutual agreement between the two parties as each decision holds equal weight. In cases where the two parties disagree and seek legal action, the case will be ruled considering the PRC Employment Law and the PRC Employment Contract Law (Will & Emery, 2021). Thus, the employees and the employers are governed by the current legislation regardless of the work system in action. Similarly, fundamental labour rights protect the workers' rights (Liukkunen & Chen, 2016). Even those working from home are covered under this law in this context.

Furthermore, the employer provides the employee with the required office equipment once they hire them in their office. This was the standard practice in the previous work system. The requirement still holds even in remote work and hybrid mode systems. The employer must make provisions for the necessary supplies an employee needs to effectively perform their office work regardless of where they choose to work (CMS, 2020). The employees working from home are entitled to the provision of office supplies. Additionally, an employee should not suffer extra costs when doing office work. If an employee incurs any extra expenses as they work from home and have proof of that allegation, they are entitled to reimbursement from the organisation (CMS, 2020). The reimbursement does not constitute the employee roles since those are enumerated in the salary. The PRC labour law states that the employer must provide a conducive and healthy work environment (CMS, 2020). This law applies even to employees that are working from home. The employer should ensure that the residence in which the employee is working is safe and healthy.

How to Motivate Chinese Employees in this New era?
Motivation refers to the employee's positive attitude towards their job, showing that they are satisfied with the working environment (Badubi, 2017). Job satisfaction is a measure whose level is drawn from the appraisals. The employer may seek reviews of the employees regarding their jobs and the place of work. The review's results determine the level of satisfaction of the employee. However, extrinsic and intrinsic factors may affect an employee's motivation (Badubi, 2017). Thus, job satisfaction and motivation are mutually related. Employees with higher job satisfaction result in higher productivity. The motivation theories seek to explain why employees may possess motivation and satisfaction in a specific job rather than another.

A Brief Overview of Motivational Theories
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains that people prioritise their needs as per their importance, and they also tend to want more of their achievements. "Based on the basic physical, biological, social and psychological needs of human beings, Maslow came up with a five-stage theory that places the needs of the individual in different categories and prioritises their attainment" (Badubi, 2017). The five-stage theory categories are also prioritised according to their importance to an individual. In ascending order, they include physiological needs, safety and security needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs (Badubi, 2017). The physiological needs are the life-sustaining factors that human beings cannot do without. Security and safety needs are the psychological fears of an individual. Social needs are the human desire to be accepted and have a sense of belonging. Esteem

needs involve the human desire to demand respect and appreciation from others. Finally, self-actualisation needs to involve being the best version of oneself.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory/ Motivator-Hygiene is based on the idea that some factors in the workplace will result in job satisfaction while others will cause dissatisfaction. "Regarding 'satisfiers,' Herzberg noted that there were five features of work that bring about satisfaction, namely achievement, recognition, the job itself, responsibility and advancement" (Badubi, 2017). Some factors cause negative emotions to the employees like pay, management, work politics, and work relations. The theory encourages that employees should be rewarded after completing their assigned tasks with things like promotions.

McGregor's X and Y Theory focus on the manager's perspective on what causes motivation to their team. Theory X has a negative perception of the people. It advocates the need for punishment and coercion to follow the rules since they naturally dislike working. Theory Y advocates for rewards to motivate people to achieve greater things. The achievement's size depends on the reward according to the person. Therefore, employees tend to belong to either of the groups.

China-specific Aspects of Motivation

A company's productivity is dependent on the skills of its employees. However, the work environment is also a contributing factor to its productivity. A healthy work environment that motivates the employees allows growth for both the employee and the company (HROne, 2020). Some characteristics define the Chinese work environment, which can be referred to as the work culture. A positive work culture allows companies to attract the needed talents. Similarly, it leads to improved job performance as the employees are in a sound state, which encourages job satisfaction. The work culture is unique in each country, and it determines the companies that can operate in that environment (HROne, 2020). The Chinese work culture is defined by specific parts that will be discussed below.

In the past, researchers agreed that Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor/hygiene theory are not necessarily transferable to other cultures than the original cultures within those theories have been established (Loh et al., 2000). Whilst Geren (Geren, 2011) concludes that McGregor's X and Y Theory cannot be applied in a Chinese context with a collectivistic orientation.

In all three cases, "western thinking" was applied to the Chinese environment. It is often referred to as a philosophical viewpoint to understand the interplay of western models based on needs and eastern models based on values, often represented in Confucian dynamism. Jaw at all proposed an equation model in their research, trying to establish a link between traditional Chinese values and cultural dimensions postulated by Hofstede (Hofstede et al., 1991)
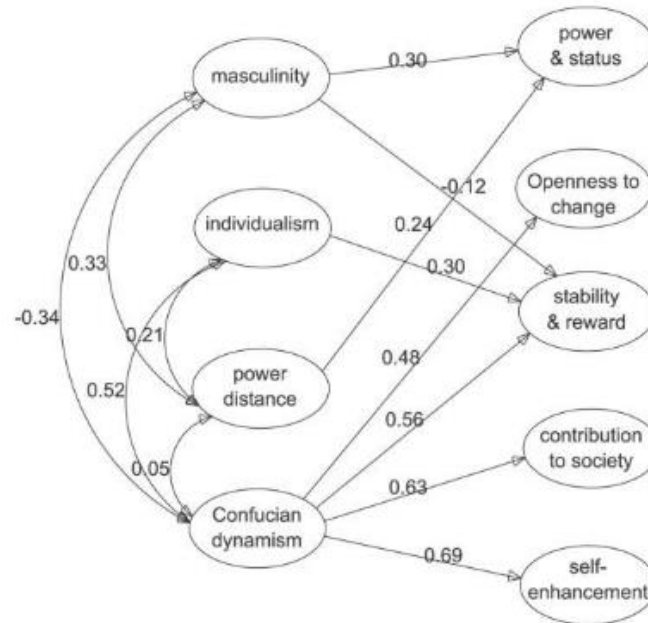
Figure 2: Structural equation model linking cultural values and work (Jaw et al., 2007)

For typical HRM areas such as performance management & retention, which are closely related to the motivation of employees, flexible work arrangements will also bring mixed feelings. Some authors mentioned in their research the importance of autonomy & empowerment to achieve higher motivation, especially among knowledge workers (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016), whilst traditionally in China, financial rewards still play a central role in talent attraction and retention and performance management more broadly (Cooke, 2021) and often outweigh other factors.

Nie and Feng (Nie & Feng, 2020) identified a rather worrying trend in their research paper. It highlights that especially tech-oriented startup companies misuse the concept of flexible work as a psychological incentive to work overtime. These companies often allow their employees to work from wherever they want, whenever they want, and in doing so, the employees voluntarily work overtime (Nie & Feng, 2020). Systems and practices have yet to be adopted to new and flexible work environments. Especially performance evaluation proves difficult in China's flexible work environments, and managers tend to expect more written reporting (Gao et al., 2022).

In general, China adheres to a more rigid hierarchy which is also seen in its workplaces (HROne, 2020). In the workplace, one is expected to follow instructions as given by the supervisor. Similarly, the Chinese workforce has normalised working overtime, which is a job requirement for many employers (HROne, 2020). It is justifiable since the law does not specify the regular working hours. At the same time, napping is allowed, especially during lunch break (HROne, 2020). This is a practice that is unacceptable in so many countries.

Additionally, Guanxi, that is, relationships, are highly regarded in China (HROne, 2020). It is the Chinese form of networking where colleagues form social networks to support and enjoy together. Another unique characteristic of the Chinese workforce is the great respect for titles (HROne, 2020). Leaders' ideas are highly revered due to the deep respect they are accorded. China also encourages humility, and it is incorporated into its culture (HROne, 2020). The people recognise group success more than personal success. Lastly, the Chinese workforce

follows the 996-work culture introduced by Jack Ma (HROne, 2020). This means they start working at 9:00 am till 9:00 pm continuously for six days every week. This way of working is often the standard in tech companies, where people can rise to well-paid positions extremely fast. At the same time, there is also a counter-movement characterised by the term "Laying Flat" (South China Morning Post, 2021). On one side, it can be described as an attitude or movement only to do the bare minimum to ensure financial survival and focus more on enjoying life, whilst other followers of the movement perceive the world as unfair and, therefore and do not see any point anymore in seeking academic or career advancements (South China Morning Post, 2021). In August 2021, the Chinese authorities ruled that the "996" policy is in fact illegal and published guidelines accordingly (Reuters, 2021).

Conclusion

The New Work system that has leading innovations like remote work and hybrid mode has been adopted globally. According to the history of work, tremendous changes marked each decade, and technology and innovation played a significant role in their implementation. These changes have been seen in various nations, and China is one of them. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, China shifted to remote work. However, after the strict regulations were eased, the cities began to open so did the workplaces. After returning to work, the hybrid mode was born out of the workforce practice. Some companies reported increased productivity after adopting the New Work system, and others experienced no change. However, further studies should be done to come up with conclusive reports.

Moreover, digitalisation will continue to affect the Chinese workforce now and in the future. Thus, the companies should make a point of incorporating digitalisation tools in their operations. The office space should encourage and accommodate the new changes. Hence, remodelling of the office structure is recommended in the future.

Future Work

This paper described in a short format the current state of research regarding New Work and China, recent developments of the labour code and motivational implications of New Work scenarios. It can serve as a stepping stone for future research in those areas. The aftermath of COVID-19 will only be visible once the pandemic passed and the workforce is no longer subject to COVID-19 related measures. Once there is no need anymore to forcibly apply work from home due to health concerns, it will be interesting to see how work systems further evolve: Are they de-evolving back to the old pre-pandemic way of working or do they further evolve – into constant hybrid systems or maybe even evolve into complete remote systems in specific industries? This paper serves as a snapshot of the current conditions at this point in time and can be used to re-examine the findings at a later point in time once the pandemic is over.

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