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THE PEOPLE'S MONEY

The Struggle for Work-Life Balance in China

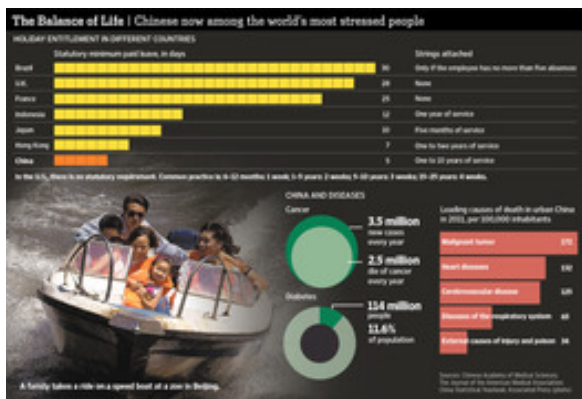
Some Stressed-Out Chinese Are Re-Evaluating Their Priorities



By **WEI GU**

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The public disclosure by one of China’s best-known technology entrepreneurs that he has cancer, and how that has changed his view of life, has caused some businesspeople to re-evaluate their aggressive pursuits of wealth and success.



Kai-Fu Lee recently revealed his lymphoma diagnosis in a message to his 50 million followers on Sina Weibo. But what has resonated far wider is his repudiation of the work-comes-first mentality that drives so many Chinese businesspeople.

“It’s only now, when I’m suddenly faced with possibly losing 30 years of life, that I’ve been able to calm down and reconsider,” wrote the

52-year-old founder and CEO of technology incubator Innovation Works and former president of Google China. He said macho efforts like seeing who could sleep less were “naive.”

Efforts to talk to Mr. Lee were unsuccessful.

The number of people diagnosed with cancer every year in China is expected to almost

double to 6.6 million in 2020, according to the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences. Pollution and unhealthy lifestyles are among the main culprits, research shows.

The long hours in Asia has something to do with the Asian culture, said Justine Campbell, a counselor and coach at Mindquest Group. "There is a hidden rule that you couldn't leave the office until your boss leaves. Work-life balance is hardest for middle management. It is about how to fit it all in." Her advice is "to delegate and outsource their work, schedule relaxation time, and try not to be so hard on themselves."

Chinese workers report that they are feeling increasingly stressed out, with 75% saying their stress level has risen in the past year. In the rest of the world, an average 48% of workers said they felt more stress, according to a survey by temporary-office-space provider Regus.

One factor working against the Chinese is that many workers get only five vacation days a year, among the fewest in the world, according to Mercer, a human-resources consulting company. Those who work for private companies find it hardest to take leave, because the entrepreneurs who have devoted all their energy to work feel their employees should do the same, according to surveys.

For David Yu, a partner at Shanghai law firm Llinks Law Offices, working until midnight is routine. He is concerned about this health. "I really feel what happened to [Mr. Lee] can well happen to me tomorrow," Mr. Yu said. But spending time with his wife and two daughters is a luxury, he said. "It is exhausting to be a successful businessman in China."

Although many Chinese have to work long hours just to get by, it is a lifestyle choice for many middle-class people. Fortunes are made so quickly in China's fast-expanding economy that some people work all the time just so they don't miss that one golden chance.

Lydia Li, general manager for design at gift maker Xiqi Art, said every morning when she wakes up, she feels she is drowning in WeChat messages and work emails. A lot of the requests are from friends or business associates to be connected to other people or to work together on new projects.

"Although I feel anxious in the morning, at night I get a real sense of accomplishment," she said. "There are just so many opportunities in China, and everyone seems to be working on several things at the same time."

But as China gets richer and its population ages, goals have started to shift. William Wang, a former executive for PricewaterhouseCoopers and General Motors in China, has stepped off the corporate ladder. He was traveling so much for work, he often spent just one month a year at home. In the past few years, he has run his private-equity firm in Shanghai while commuting every weekend to Hong Kong to see his wife, who works at

a bank, and his daughter.

He decided to quit after coming back from a long trip and his 3-year-old looked at him as if he were a stranger. "She is at this cutest stage of life and I want to be part of it," said Mr. Wang. "A few years later, when I want to play with my daughter, she might say 'go away.' "

Now, he is becoming the trailing spouse on his wife's new assignment in London and plans to study history at Cambridge University.

"When I was young, my goal was to study for an M.B.A. at a top U.S. school and earn a lot of money. Now, I believe we will be happy as long as the whole family is together—doesn't matter if we have to lead a modest life."

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